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PSYCHO
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UTSURIGI GAISUKE'S NONSENSE KILLING

Psycho Logical (vol. 1)

Utsurigi Gaisuke's Nonsense Killing

NISIOISIN

~Translation by Dutch Angle

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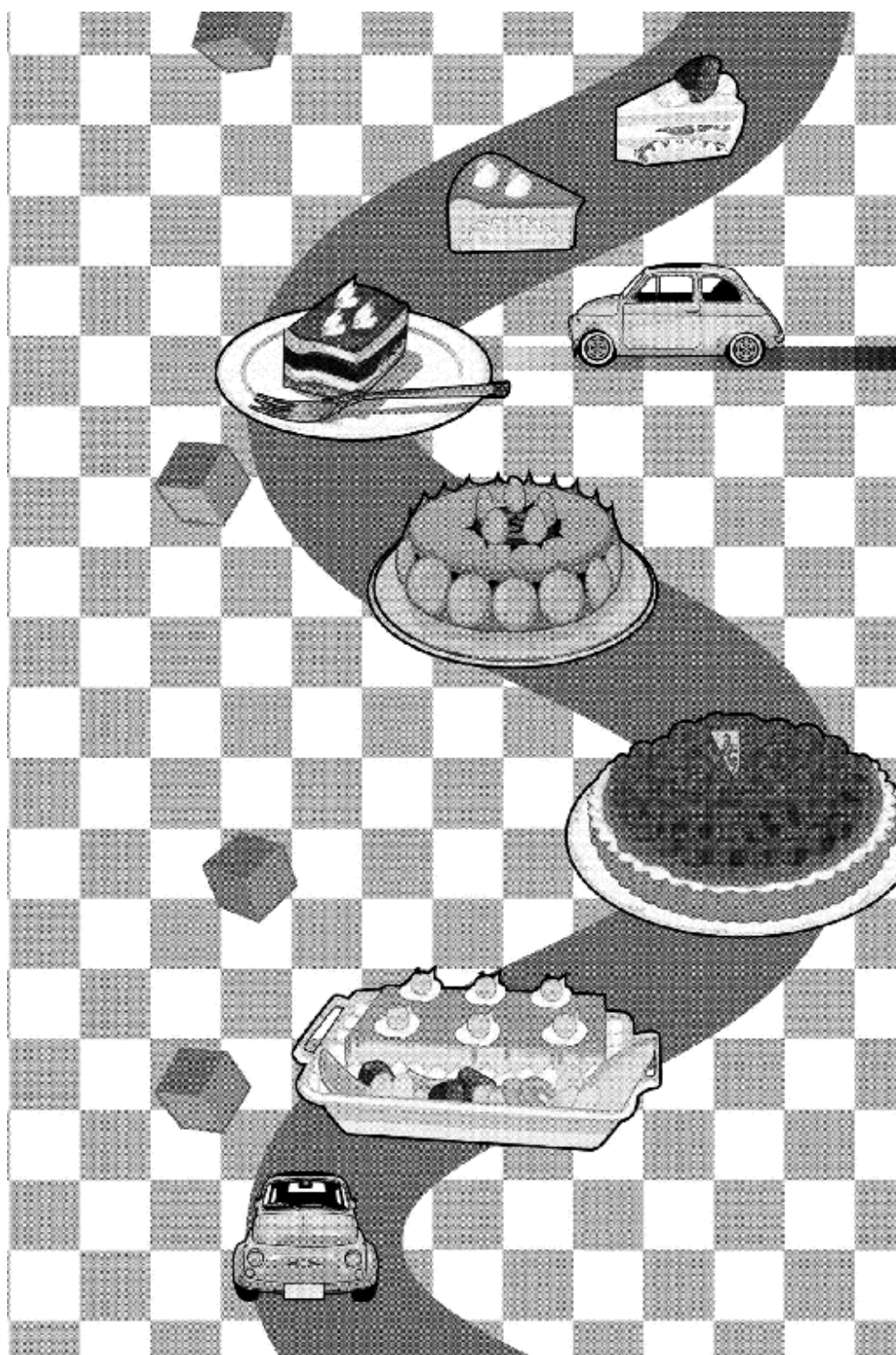
TABLE OF CONTENTS

* "Day Two (2) – Contagion Crime" onwards are included in volume 2.

Cast of Characters

Kunagisa Tomo	《Dead Blue》
Suzunashi Neon	Chaperone
Me (Narrator)	Nineteen-year-old
Shadou Kyouichirou	《Mad Demon》
Ougaki Shito	Assistant
Uze Misachi	Secretary
Koutari Hinayoshi	Researcher
Neo Furuara	Researcher
Miyoshi Kokoromi	Researcher
Kasugai Kasuga	Researcher
Utsurigi Gaisuke	《Malignant Green》
Aikawa Jun	Contractor
Ishimaru Kouta	Great Thief
Zerozaki Itoshiki	Intruder

*One aspect of genius is clearly
the gift of producing scandals.*
—Akutagawa Ryuunosuke

“You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don’t you?”

Abruptly, without any preface or preamble, instinctually and inevitably, without a drop of doubt or inkling of indecision, without a hint of hesitation or a trace of tact, yet without being particularly forceful or especially arrogant, as if looking up at, as if looking down upon, smoothly and slickly, as if it were clear as day, Utsurigi spoke.

I did not answer.

However, silently, I peered through the lenses of the man who was once known as *Malignant Green*, Utsurigi Gaisuke. Utterly silent, ever silent, he and I faced each other, squaring off.

As if, from the very start, he hadn’t expected an answer at all, Utsurigi Gaisuke continued, unbothered.

“When it comes down to it— I believe that, to you, her very existence is a source of *animosity*; she is the subject of your hatred. Hatred, yes, hatred. There’s no denying it, right? Of course you can’t. You can’t honestly say you never once thought ‘If only Kunagisa Tomo didn’t exist,’ can you? Not that *I’d* find any fault with it, but you yourself, wouldn’t allow it. It’d be unforgiveable. Yes- to tell the truth, if that *Dead Blue* didn’t exist, I won’t say that you could have been happy, but perhaps you would have been able to lead a more proper life, don’t you think?”

I did not answer.

“...Have you ever thought about it? With that intellect deemed remarkable ,even by the preeminent research facility the ER3 system, with that brain of yours that is placed so rightfully amongst the *Scarlet Strongest’*s possessions, have you even once considered it? Why, amongst ourselves, had Kunagisa Tomo earned such a violent, accursed name like *Dead Blue*? Have you ever considered the reason?”

I did not answer.

“That’s right, to harbour a doubt like that— even the shallowest interest or faintest curiosity would be reason enough to instil such a narrow and trifling question, and yet your mind has never once approached it. If that’s not *avoidance*, if that’s not *apprehension*, if that’s not *dread* towards Kunagisa Tomo, then what on earth is it? Your entire life is spent running from Kunagisa Tomo. From the moment you first met, you’ve been part of one grand race to flee. For example, think back. Remember who you were before. Back when you still had *that thing that made you you*. While it may not have been anything to puff your chest out about, at least you didn’t have to crawl along the ground in such a pathetic way. While you may have possessed an *individualism* that always set you apart from others, you were most certainly an *individual*, were you not?”

I did not answer.

“For example, I, Utsurigi Gaisuke, have been saddled with the undue and endlessly disgraceful epithet of *Malignant Green*; however, when compared to Kunagisa Tomo’s *Dead Blue*, even that is still several times, dozens of times, hundreds of times more respectable. It’s so sensible I might cry. I assume you’re also aware of Ayanami Hyou, who, if I were to put it in simple *specs*, was far more vicious than Kunagisa Tomo. Even still, the name given to that *seeker* was simply *Cheetah*. No no, no no no no, even before that. Have you spared any thought to what came before that? How was Kunagisa Tomo, who was fourteen at the time, who is now not even twenty, someone you could rightly describe as a little girl, how was that small, fragile existence able to become our leader? Naturally, her skill as a technician was so immense that, even as number one, she still towered over second place. No, not skill, but **power**. That being said, amongst us, it’s not as if her position as number one was absolute. Still, she was, without a doubt, our leader. For our leader to be anyone besides her was unthinkable. Have you ever wondered about that?”

I did not answer.

“…That’s because all of us knew. All of us understood. The eight of

us besides Kunagisa Tomo, each and every one of us, regardless of what we thought individually, had collectively, in the height of our conviction, realised. That by ourselves, the solitary existence that we call ourselves, *Dead Blue* was unequivocally and hopelessly insurmountable. Even the bundle of defiance and ambition that wouldn't acknowledge anything beyond herself or recognize anything besides herself, the ultimate narcissist Hinemosu Suzu had no choice but to accept it. That's why *Dead Blue*— No, perhaps we could have surpassed her. I'm sure we could have. If that's all that it took, then it would have been easy. I don't know about the other seven, and I don't particularly care to, but at the very least **I** could have done it. If I were to *simulate* it, it wouldn't have been hard. However, I have no particular desire to surpass Dead Blue. Which is to say, honestly and openly, **I have absolutely no desire to**. I don't even want to imagine it. If continuing to push forwards only left me with regret, then I'd much rather retreat. To push forwards would be to pass on into a disparate realm in which one ought not tread. We were all conscious of that fact, rather, we were self-conscious of it. And that is why, for that very reason, she is *Dead Blue*, the *Blue on the Verge of Death*. That's just how it is. – Her brother, Kunagisa Nao, I suppose you've met him?"

I did not answer.

"It's not as if we've been in contact all that much, but even then, it's clear that he's surprisingly decent, a stand-up guy. Do you even understand what that means? Despite being made up of nearly identical genes, there lies an overwhelming difference between Kunagisa Nao and Kunagisa Tomo. Where do you suppose that stems from? It's certainly not an issue of genetics, or DNA, or anything inherent. To try and boil down her current situation to something like that would be meaningless. In other words, Kunagisa Tomo is an exceptional phenomenon. Exceptionally exceptional. An outlier amongst outliers, outlandish amongst the outlandish, that is who Kunagisa Tomo is. So outrageous, that it must be a joke, and yet so tasteless that it couldn't be, that breed of exceptional outlier. An unparalleled deviant. You have quite an intriguing and bizarre personality, but even then, you can't possibly think of yourself as more deviant than Kunagisa Tomo, can you? When compared to her, you still land well, well, weellll within the bounds of normality, although that might be a bit hard for you to accept."

I did not answer.

"For example, if we were to say *Mankind's Strongest* is a stand-in for *Halt*, anybody would understand. None would even think to disagree. That is, after all, the meaning behind a *red* light. However, Kunagisa Tomo is not red, but rather its antithesis, blue. Forgiving of everything, tolerant of all, refreshing and pleasant like the clear blue sky. In spite of this, that girl's existence calls out to me, to us, and to you to halt, eternally, everlastingly. Isn't that right? After all, you haven't taken a single solitary step. In the six years between your meeting and now, without learning a thing, without gaining a thing, without destroying a thing, without loving a thing, and without discerning or discarding a thing, in those six endless years, you have been idly, senselessly, meaninglessly, and unwittingly halted. You've been halted all this time. Isn't that right?"

I did not answer.

"It is for that reason *Dead Blue* is the subject of your hatred. The subject of your enmity. The subject of your malice and your bloodlust. At least she should be in theory. An existence that decisively changed your life. No, that's not right— your life has been decisively **unchanged**. An existence that would not allow change. Of course, you're not just stupid, foolish, and cowardly. Your stupidity made you *clever*, your foolishness made you *sharp*, and your cowardice made you *cunning*. That's why it took you less than a year to realize the mind-boggling situation you were in. To you, *Dead Blue* was a *Killer Application*, a dangerous element. And so you ran. And so you ran. And so you ran. In order to protect yourself, you fled into that grand, transcendental *system*, but even that was merely symbolic. I don't have any right to find fault with that. You're free to do as you want. Even you have some level of autonomy, so I'll respect that. However, even with your escape, even though you appeared to be *running away*, without having changed at all, you were led right back to where you started, right next to Kunagisa Tomo. Just like six years ago, you are right by Kunagisa Tomo's side. Have you ever thought about it? Have you ever considered it? You must have known better than anyone else. If only Kunagisa Tomo didn't exist. If only you hadn't seen the *Verge of Death*."

If I hadn't seen it.

If I hadn't seen it, what would have happened?

I did not answer.

"If only you didn't have an *eye for others*, – However, that delusion is just too much, it's too blissful, it's too wretched. If not delusion, then perhaps nonsense. You saw the *Verge of Death*, and so you met Kunagisa Tomo. That in itself would have been fine, if not fine, then at least better than this, but tragically you were fascinated by her, and what's worse, you fascinated her. That's what we call an unheard of, unrivalled, unprecedented stroke of bad luck. I'm sure you're familiar, but I, on the other hand, have never known such terrible misfortune. In this world, there's no greater misery than mutual affection, even more so when it comes to oddities such as yourselves. You think so too, don't you? Because of your heart that yearns for her, and for the sake of her heart that yearns for you, how many people have been sacrificed? Those around you who were cut down, who were left to rot, who are dead and buried, how many were there?"

I remembered them.

And them.

I did not answer.

"Looking back on your life even a little bit should prove it. Even without looking back, just giving it some thought ought to be proof enough. Try to remember, even faintly. Washing away blood with blood, mopping up flesh with flesh, sawing through bone with bone. That is the path you've been walking down. Rather symbolic, isn't it? That's right, a *symbol*. Speaking of symbols, *Cheetah*, the guy I mentioned before– Ayanami Hyou. He was the only one of us who was the same age as Kunagisa Tomo. He was fourteen when *Cluster* was formed. In other words, the title of *child genius* was not a cross shouldered by *Dead Blue* alone, not that I'm saying that *that was the only reason* that, among all our members, he was the one closest to Kunagisa Tomo. Someone close. As a third party and as someone who was quite

antagonistic towards Ayanami Hyou, I feel a little uncomfortable saying this, but *Cheetah* was undoubtedly in love with *Dead Blue*. He was entranced by her, and at the same time, he was enthralled by her. All geniuses are isolated and solitary, but that doesn't mean all geniuses are in love with solitude. A sense of comradery— a sense of community— a sense of compatriotism— or perhaps a sense of commonality. It doesn't matter what you call it. In any case, that's what it was. I suppose you've already heard about Ayanami Hyou's research abilities from Kunagisa Tomo, so there's no need for me to say anything, is there?"

I did not answer.

"Including Kunagisa Tomo as our leader, there were nine of us in total; if a single one of us had been stripped away, we likely wouldn't have been able to come together as a group; however, even then, I can say the ones at the centre of it all were Kunagisa Tomo and Ayanami Hyou. If Kunagisa Tomo was the CPU, then Ayanami Hyou was the monitor. Of course, each of the nine members was a renegade of a different genre, so whether someone was the most essential or the second most exceptional, that kind of *hierarchy* was hard to determine, and as far as we were concerned, there was no need to. However, I can say that for Ayanami Hyou to be drawn to Kunagisa Tomo was, in a sense, inevitable. Even you understand why, don't you? Because it's you, you understand why, don't you? It might be that you are the only one who could. Now, here's a question for you. How do you imagine Kunagisa Tomo responded to Ayanami Hyou's feelings, to his heart, to his words?"

I did not answer.

"She didn't. Kunagisa Tomo didn't respond to Ayanami Hyou in the slightest. Surprising, right? It ought to be. That truth ought to be at least somewhat surprising to you. Not only that, it must be horribly inconvenient. With that one truth, that singular truth, every action that Kunagisa Tomo has taken towards you, one by one, comes to hold a completely different meaning. As if overturned— yes, '*overthrown*' would work as well, although the specifics are beyond me. In any case, Kunagisa Tomo didn't respond to Ayanami Hyou's feelings. As for Ayanami Hyou, that delightful prodigy must

have anticipated it from the start, so he didn't approach Kunagisa Tomo unnecessarily. He didn't approach her— unnecessarily. Of course, he didn't foolishly, pitifully, and needlessly distance himself from the *Verge of Death* like you do now though. …Still, it's the same now as it ever was. Even after being cast into prison by *Dead Blue* herself, *Cheetah* still hasn't cut her off. I'm not sure whether to call him persistent, a pushover, or what, but— no, that's probably not it. That kind of youth understands instinctively— that loneliness is not theirs alone. When you get to be around my age, it becomes easy to forget that. — Speaking of which, you're the same age as Kunagisa Tomo and Ayanami Hyou, aren't you? Nineteen, was it?"

I did not answer.

"So you must know by instinct. The difference between isolation and solitude. The disparity between desecration and desolation. Right, your thoughts on the matter are likely correct. You get Utsurigi Gaisuke's seal of approval. Perhaps a bouquet for your achievement? There's no need to harbour any doubts about that, not that you'd have any room left for them. You can rest easy. What you ought to be worried about lies elsewhere. Not that I'm saying there's only ever one thing to be concerned about. No matter how you go about it, having so many problems in so many places sure makes it hard to solve them. That's what I think anyway. The road you've walked until now has certainly been rich with unspeakable hardships, but the aimless desert opening up before you now is overflowing with even more suffering. Allow me to make that prediction now."

Just what was Utsurigi trying to say?

I did not know.

I did not answer.

"As someone who has been through hell and high-water with Kunagisa Tomo for over four years, there's nothing more that I, Utsurigi Gaisuke, can warn you about. Without exaggeration, nothing. It'd be a mistake for you to turn to me in order to escape from her. If I had to say why, it's because I haven't **passed on**. You have already passed beyond the *Verge*

of Death. That's why I or someone like Ayanami Hyou wouldn't have a single word of advice for you. If I did have anything to say to you, it would have to be words of consolation — *'It's already too late,' 'what a shame,' 'you poor soul,'* and the like."

What was Utsurigi trying not to say?

I did not know.

I did not answer.

"Long ago, in your distant past, somewhere in that eternal past, you have already met your end. You've ended, and ended, and ended. In other words, you're at a *dead*-end. However, whether you've realised it or not, knowingly or unknowingly, consciously or unconsciously, is not something that I can tell from where I'm standing. Still, that may be for the best. That may sound cruel to you, but I am, after all, Kunagisa's ally. She never showed interest in me, but I was entranced by her. I was bewitched by a girl over twelve years my junior. And so, if it was for the sake of Kunagisa Tomo's happiness, I would do anything, even if it meant bringing unhappiness to others. But it's the same for you, isn't it? You're just like me and Ayanami; you should be able to tell. As long as Kunagisa Tomo is fine, everything else — yourself included— couldn't matter less."

I did not answer.

"It's not something to feel ashamed about. Not one bit. That's just the nature of Kunagisa Tomo's charm and charisma. Befitting such radiant words as *reverence* and *piety*, so much so that they're inseparable. That's right, if you'll pardon the pretension, one could even say she is an object of worship. After all, for you and me, when compared to Kunagisa Tomo, everyone else is nothing but tedium. Living or dead, it wouldn't matter, and I can say that without any self-deprecation or false modesty. If she were one, then we would be one out of a million. If we were one, then she would be a million. For the sake of Kunagisa Tomo's happiness, if one or two people had to be sacrificed, if countless lives had to be *halted*, it would be insignificant; it'd be nothing more than an insignificant triviality. I don't give a damn about things like the

'greater good.' Before her, those words are meaningless, even to you. You ought to be the same. You must be the same."

I did not answer.

"*Dead Blue* calls out to us. With that beautiful voice she calls out to those of us on the front lines. If you listen closely, it's as if you can hear her noble cry even now. *Make hell the hell named hell. Massacre the massacre named massacre. Make sin the sin named sin. Despair the despair named despair. Make chaos the chaos named chaos. Subdue the submission named submission. Be proud, we, of this beautiful world. This is the bedroom of the Verge of Death; rampage all you want, as the Verge of Death allows it.* —Doesn't it make your heart tremble? Doesn't it make your hair stand on end? She's far too much of a tyrant. Far from holding the world in the palm of her hands, to *Dead Blue*, the world is nothing more than some toy that she can play with then toss aside, something that only exists until she grows tired of it. Of course, so was I. To her, I was merely a toy that she could use for a little while. —What you mean to her, is something even I don't know. —And since I don't know, I figured I'd ask. Just what kind of toy are you?"

I did not answer.

"We have no choice but to be her tools. Let me say this again, that's not something to be ashamed of. Being a worthy tool to her is a title you should wear proudly. There's no need to be timid about it, so you can throw your weight around a bit more. Even a slave is awarded a slave's comfort. Why don't you give it a shot with me? *I'm much more useful to Kunagisa Tomo than someone like you*—or something. I'm certainly tolerant enough to handle something like that, so what are you dragging your feet for? Even though getting used and thrown away by her is a point of honour. Even though getting trampled underfoot by her is a point of pride. What is it that you're so ashamed of?"

I did not answer.

"At one point in time I— *Malignant Green*, would violate the world on her orders. *Cheetah*, *Double-Flick*, everyone, all together we brought the

world to revolution. We didn't seek to become heroes. We didn't aim to be branded as demons. I held but one wish- we held but one wish. *I want to be useful to Dead Blue— I want to live for her sake*. Without any pretence, that was it. With regards to the great feat of re-shaping the world, or the grand miracle of re-writing history, I didn't spare a single thought. The destruction of the seats of evil which society abhorred didn't satisfy any sense of justice, and the scattering of corpses of innocent women and children didn't bring forth any sense of guilt. Getting my hands on mountains of treasure didn't satisfy any avarice, and playing out a happy ending at the end of a tragedy didn't spring forth any profound emotion. To me, those things didn't matter. My goal was— no, my **reason** has always, both then and now, been singular. Singular, pre-ordained and unwavering. Singular, unshakeable and unmistakable. Her happiness. Her delight. Her pleasure. Her joy. I, in the name of *Malignant Green*— destroyed everything for her sake. I destroyed it, I destroyed it again, and then I destroyed it one more time. If it was for her sake, I would do anything. You must be like that too. If it's for her sake, you would do, without exaggeration, anything— if it was for her sake, you would throw it all away. If it was for her sake, you would bring the world to ruin. If it was for her sake, you would— kill yourself. Isn't that right?"

I did not answer.

"However— however, that's a hypothetical solution that only works if we presuppose that Kunagisa Tomo, that *Dead Blue* could ever be happy in the first place. The only one who could define what a concept as vague as happiness means to her is, after all, Kunagisa Tomo herself— but it's all the same either way. Just as I am, and even more than you are fascinated with her, Kunagisa Tomo is fascinated by you. From where I'm standing, all I can do is speculate, but if it was for your sake, Kunagisa Tomo would likely do anything. If you spoke, she would listen. No matter what you did, she would forgive you. If you told her to die, she would probably drop dead. Just as you are devoted to her, she is devoted to you. That's what we call mutual affection — however, if that's the case then we can also think about it like this. Hypothetically, if we determine the relationship between you and *Dead Blue* to be some kind of reciprocal cycle, then, just as you being with Kunagisa Tomo has caused your time to halt, perhaps by being with you, Kunagisa

Tomo's time has been halted as well—"

I.

I. I.

I did not answer.

"Of course, as I said, this is just a hypothesis. A baseless hypothesis that I arrived at by coming up with my conclusion first. However it's a hypothesis that holds quite a bit of truth. It's worth some thought. No matter how miserable or fortunate they might think they are, even if we say that observations from a third party can never be more or less than needless concern to those involved, for one who has survived an attempt to *halt* themselves by their own hand, there can be no happiness of any kind. Just as you could not become happy, perhaps Kunagisa Tomo cannot experience genuine happiness, isn't that right? Just as the solitary existence known as Kunagisa Tomo is the cause for you, the solitary existence that is you is certainly the cause for Kunagisa Tomo. And so, the *halting* circulates and spirals through you and back into her. The *Verge of Death* passes beyond itself and arrives at a *dead end*. As long as you are together. As long as you exist."

I.

I. I.

I did not answer.

"But here's the frightening part. That doesn't mean that it would be better if you just disappeared. For example, say I killed you right now. If I, Utsurigi Gaisuke, murdered you. That's not necessarily an unthinkable supposition. Like I said before, if it was for *Dead Blue*'s sake, I wouldn't shy away even from murder. I've been captivated to that extent at the very least. So, for example, let's say we erase you and extinguish any trace of your existence. Doing so would mean extinguishing Kunagisa Tomo in that same instant. We would only be taking what was halted temporarily and halting it

forever. That’s all. It wouldn’t help in the slightest. In fact, it would only make things worse. That’s what’s so frightening. That’s what's so revolting. The best thing we can do is to leave things as they are, and yet, as they are, things are simply the worst; there isn’t even a next-best choice. You’re finished. And so, Kunagisa Tomo is finished as well. From here on out, you two will continue to end for all of time. It’s not simply over, you will *continue* to end. The only way to describe it would be ‘merciless’. You two are truly pitiable. And that is why, for that very reason, I have a question for you. There’s something I have to ask. I have the right, and you have an obligation to answer. So please, honestly, without any deception, without leaving any room for doubt, will you answer me?”

Utsurigi Gaisuke spoke.

“You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don’t you?”

I.

I. I.

I-

DAY ONE (1) - THE END OF CORRECTNESS
KUNAGISA TOMO
《Dead Blue》

0

Now then.

Hello, Everyone.

Please accompany me for a little while.

1

"So, Tomo. This — what was it again? This Utsurigi guy, just what kind of person is he?"

It was a borrowed car, so it probably wasn't wise to be talking while driving, but we hadn't come across a single person, dog, or car in quite some time; it was the kind of country road that made you think not even the wicked hand of municipal construction had touched it in over a decade. No, to even call it a road might be giving it too much credit. There were no traffic lights and likely no risk of an accident, but as I questioned Kunagisa Tomo sitting in the passenger seat, I slowed down all the same.

"Mmm?" She tilted her head curiously. "Didn't I already tell you, Iichan?"

She said.

"I swear I already gave you the rundown on Sacchan."

"No, not yet,"

I answered, but if Kunagisa said that she did, then she probably did. Kunagisa's memory was so accurate that it rivalled the precision of a machine, whereas my memory was so faulty that it should be inspected to find out precisely what's wrong with it. In other words, as always, in my usual

fashion, I had done a remarkable job at forgetting. However, forgetting something is functionally the same as not knowing.

"Well then, you see, Sacchan is—"

"Let's start there. Why *Sacchan*? It's Utsurigi Gaisuke, right? Where do you get *Sacchan* from a name like that?"

"It's a nickname. You know, just like Chee-kun, Acchan, and Hiichan. He was *Malignant Green*, so he's Sacchan."

"Hmm… gotcha."

I tentatively accepted her reasoning, but still, her naming sense couldn't help but turn some heads. What's the point of making a nickname for a nickname?

"Sacchan comes from *saikin*, meaning bacteria, huh…? He kinda sounds like some school kid getting bullied."

"Nah. Sacchan wasn't really like that. If I had to pick, that was more Chee-kun's role. Sacchan was the opposite, he was more of a bully. But you're right, within *Team*, Sacchan did always stick out like a sore thumb, like he alone was out of place. Like part of him was always apart."

"More than you?"

"I was everyone's manager y'know. It would've been a problem if I was out of place or didn't fit in."

Well, nothing to say about that.

I had recently learned to stay quiet.

"Who was Chee-kun again? He was your researcher right?"

"Yup. He's a first-rate *seeker* with serious skills. As long as it's in this galaxy, he can find it. This time 'round too, I don't know things would've turned out without him. Chee-kun hates Sacchan though, so it was quite a bit

of trouble getting him to help."

"How things would have turned out without him, huh…?" Even with his help, that didn't change much. It's not like we knew how things were going to pan out after all. "So? If Chee-kun was your researcher, then Sacchan… Utsurigi was what, exactly? Did he hold the secrets to the big bang or something?"

"Nope," Kunagisa denied flatly. "Iichan, it seems you might have misunderstood some things. To put it bluntly, Chee-kun's *seeking* is completely beyond understanding. I don't mean to sound bitter, but if I were to spend a hundred years, or even a thousand, I still wouldn't be able to match what Chee-kun could dig up in a single day. Even among *Team*, Chee-kun was absurd."

"Huh, that's a bit unexpected."

Incidentally, this is the same Chee-kun who was currently serving a one hundred fifty year sentence in a maximum security prison over in America. If I remember correctly, Chee-kun's nineteen just like Kunagisa and I, so yeah, with all the modern improvements to medicine and welfare, he might just make it out of there while he's still alive.

"That's why, when compared to Chee-kun, Sacchan's specs might feel like they come up a little short. But of course, their fields of expertise are different, so you can't just compare them one-to-one like that. It'd be like comparing Hiei Mountain and Kamo River."

"True, if you were to compare their wonder, you can't exactly find a clear point of comparison. So? What's his specialty?"

"Um. Sacchan's specialty is what you might call *cracking*"

"...a *cracker*, huh?"

"Yup." Kunagisa nodded. "You could list all kinds of differences between hackers and crackers, but in Sacchan's case, in Utsurigi Gaisuke's case alone, there's no need to differentiate them at all. You see, Sacchan, he

poured each and every ounce of his *specs* into destruction; he squandered them on destruction so that, as long as that was his goal, he could match up to even the most skilled generalist. He's a highly specialised, hyper specialised, decidedly over-specialised disruptor."

"All so he could *crack*?"

"All so he could *crack*." It was unusual for Kunagisa to acquiesce so easily. "As his name suggests, he's definitely stubborn, that Sacchan. He doesn't have a rotten personality like Chee-kun, but it's like he finds value in being a nuisance, like he enjoys causing trouble for other people. That kind of thing."

"And you're saying that's not a rotten personality?"

"He was a man of character though. He was the second oldest of our members after all. Uh, well, not that that really has anything to do with age. Not too sure."

"What kanji do you use for *Utsurigi*?"

"I think it was 'a tree for hanging rabbits'. And then 'Gai' meaning one hundred quintillion, and then 'suke' with the vehicle radical. We didn't use our real names all that much, so I don't remember too well though."

Just his name made me think ill of him.

Well, not like I was one to talk.

"But it doesn't make sense… what is someone that headstrong doing at the research facility of the infamous *Mad Demon* Kyouichirou? That's what I don't get. Chee-kun didn't explain that to you?"

"Nope. Like I said, Chee-kun and Sacchan don't get along. He didn't tell me anything other than the place. But well, just learning that Shadou Kyouichirou's research facility was in Aichi prefecture is something to be grateful for. I could have probably asked Nao-kun as well, but Nao-kun is Nao-kun, and has plenty of Nao-kun business to take care of."

"Something to be grateful for, huh…? As someone forced to tag along, it's actually got me a little bummed out instead…"

"Is that so?"

"Well, it's definitely no trip to Universal Studios."

Resting my weight on the steering wheel, I let out a sigh.

From Kyoto, we'd passed through Osaka and Nara, and should already be in Mie prefecture. I wasn't sure if Mie was in the Kinki, or Chubu region, but if it was in Chubu, then our destination, Aichi, ought to be close. I checked the analog watch that Hime had given me a little while ago; it had already been three hours since our departure from Kyoto. If we had taken the highway, then we would have already been arriving at our destination, but last month and the month before I'd gotten injured here and there with my arms taking the brunt of it. They'd only just healed the other day, so I was a little reluctant to drive on the freeway.

It's not like we were in a hurry anyways.

This time around, time wasn't what was important.

"That's right, Inoji."

A voice that had kept silent until now piped up from the backseat. I peered over my shoulder. "You were awake, Suzunashi?" I asked. Then, sounding a little irritated,

"You and Blue were jabbering so loud it woke me up. Even Sleeping Beauty couldn't handle that much racket. Driving should be done in silence,"

She said.

"Besides, the backseat of this Fiat is cramped… It's no good for sleeping. I'll never understand Asano's tastes. She's into Japanese stuff, but buys a foreign car? Why'd it have to be such a narrow and uncomfortable one too? I mean, it's got no horsepower. Is there even an engine under the hood?

Jeez, I don't get what's going on inside her head. Any clue, Inoji?"

"No comment."

"Figures," Suzunashi chuckled.

"So, Suzunashi, what you said earlier, *that's right*? What were you talking about?"

"Well," Suzunashi nodded, "for Blue, Professor Kyouichirou and Utsurigi are old acquaintances that she can speak to on equal footing as specialists in similar fields. And you, Inoji. You spent five years studying abroad at that state of the art research system, ER3, or HMO, or whatever, so this isn't exactly uncharted territory for you either, right? But for me, this is my first encounter with the species known as professors and researchers. I don't know how much of a bummer it is for you Inoji, but it's far worse for me."

"That's unexpected coming from you, Suzunashi."

"I may not look it, but I'm pretty anxious around strangers. How do you even talk to people like that, researchers who've made it all the way to where they are through study alone? I can't even imagine. I mean, I don't even know how to figure out the volume of a cone."

"Hmm. I see… by the way, Suzunashi, are you a fan of Doctor Strangelove?"

"Well, I don't hate it."

"Then you'll probably be okay. You'll get along just fine."

"…is that how it is? Even so, honestly… Inoji. Please make this the last time. I agreed because Asano asked me to, but I'm not exactly looking to fill my schedule. Man, you can't teach an old dog new tricks, can't boil the ocean, and you can't turn down Asano Miiko."

"I'm grateful, you know."

“Anyone can be grateful. Doing something anyone could do is lame. Do something only you can do, Inoji.”

She said, lying back down in the narrow backseat. Because Suzunashi was tall for a woman— or rather, because one hundred and eighty nine centimetres would be quite tall even for a man— the squeeze was fairly tight. Her getup was exceedingly formal; without a hint of seasonal awareness, she wore a pure black suit along with a slim-fitting collared shirt and a necktie to bring it all together. It couldn’t have made getting some sleep any easier.

Suzunashi Neon.

She was the good friend of my neighbour and owner of this Fiat 500, Asano Miiko. Twenty five years old. Typically she worked at the Enryakuji Temple on Mount Hiei, but occasionally she would descend the mountain. I had gotten to spend some time with her through Miiko, but as for Kunagisa and Suzunashi, today was their first meeting.

“So, Inoji, how much longer do you think it’ll be?”

“Not sure… Mie’s in Chubu, right?”

“Kinki.”

“Is that so? Then we’ve still got a while to go, I think.”

“Inoji, whether it’s Chubu or Kinki, doesn’t change the fact that Mie and Aichi are right next to each other, you know. It's got nothing to do with how long it’ll take.”

“Ah, that’s right isn’t it? It slipped my mind.”

“That isn’t the kind of thing that people forget. Iichan, don’t tell me… you’re not one of those people that can only name half the prefectures are you?”

“Oh come on, that’s going too far. There aren’t really people out there who don’t know all of them, are there?”

"I don't. Until just recently, I even thought that Mount Hiei was in Kyoto."

"That's pretty hard to believe…"

"I also had no clue that Kyoto had a sea."

"Try not to sound so proud about it…"

"Hah! I may be bad at math, but I'll have you know I also sucked at social studies. I dropped out of Elementary school before I even learned the difference between Australia and Austria. I can't even tell the difference between China and Mongolia. But you know what? It doesn't matter. It's never bothered me one bit."

"Is that right?"

"It is. In order for people to live, there isn't really all that much they need to know, although nowadays, it feels like there's probably a few too many people who don't even know that much."

Suzunashi added sarcastically, tipping the brim of her hat to cover her eyes.

Along with her raven-coloured hair, long legs, and stylish figure, the inclusion of the hat could only make me think of Jigen Daisuke, although Jigen's place was in the passenger's seat which was currently occupied by a lively blue-haired girl, so that kind of spoiled it. No, after all, with the current driver being me, the comparison to Lupin the Third wasn't one I was exactly eager to invite.

"But honestly, I'm sorry for making such an unreasonable request. If only Miiko was free—"

"Inoji," Suzunashi spoke listlessly, her hat still pulled over her eyes. "I get that the circumstances called for it this time, but I'd prefer if you stopped making Asano a character in these kind of stories. She's always been the kind of sap who likes poking around in other people's business, the kind

that likes to be relied on. She's always running around forcing unwanted and unnecessary favours on people. It'd be one thing if she was just incompetent, but Asano's actually pretty helpful. I'm not one who likes complimenting my friends, but as a swordswoman she's top notch, and she's no slouch at other things too. And above all else, she's not very smart. To put it bluntly, she's an idiot. Not just your run-of-the-mill idiot either, she's mad stupid. Because of that, she's the type that ends up getting used by people."

"That's supposed to be a compliment?"

"It is. What else would it be? Anyway, I'm not saying you're the kind of person who would do something like that, but still, I don't want you causing her too much trouble. Of course, that goes for me too."

"I understand."

"I'm sure you do. You understand completely, and yet you do it anyway. That's what doesn't sit well with me. Honestly, I wish you would just do as you're told and sit still. To be clear, this isn't me saying it's wrong to ask for help, but it's not good to rely on others to do things that you could easily do yourself. It's always simpler to do something on your own anyways. Too many cooks will spoil the broth, so to speak."

"I feel like that would be pretty great though. Or are you saying you wouldn't want a team of private chefs?"

"Stop trying to find fault in everything I say. No matter the process, it all means nothing if you never accomplish anything. Remember it well."

It had been quite some time since I'd seen Suzunashi last, but her love of lecturing was still the same as ever. However, as the person who dragged her along, it was probably my responsibility to grin and bear it for a while.

Moreover, it's not like I could say that Suzunashi had been completely wrong.

Just that she had been a little off the mark.

“Sorry, Neon-chan,” Kunagisa said. “It’s just that, this time ‘round, we really needed a chaperone with us for sure. Iichan and I are minors, y’know. Even if I’m fine bending the rules a little, you know how Iichan is.”

“There’s nothing for you to apologise for, Blue. You’re a beauty after all.”

“It’s fine, because I’m a beauty?”

“I wish you wouldn’t make me state the obvious,” Suzunashi chuckled defiantly. “The value of a beautiful girl eclipses the value of all else in this world. Be it nobility or justice, joy or compassion, purpose or virtue, humanity or love, the whole of creation is the same as dirt when standing before a beautiful girl.”

By applying her ridiculously biased set of values, she was able to categorise the world into three: beautiful girls, herself, and others. It seemed like her warped manner of philosophising was still alive and well.

Well, they do say that people tend to value the things that they don’t have. Besides, to find fault in, or impose yourself on other people’s values probably isn’t the best way to go about things.

“Well then, let me get back to sleep. I’ve been pulling all-nighters lately so I’m awfully sleepy. I can’t even find the words to convey how awful it’s been. What I’m saying is, Inoji, wake me when we get there.”

‘Roger that,”

I replied, and not long after the road began to narrow, so driving took more and more of my focus. It seemed like it didn’t take long for Suzunashi to doze off (although being able to sleep in such a place was honestly incredible), as I soon heard the sound of snoring. Kunagisa began poking around at some kind of pocket computer. I couldn’t even begin to imagine whatever it was that this geeky, blue-haired techie was working on, so I didn’t bother asking.

Instead I thought-

-about the place we were heading, about the man we were about to meet.

"Utsurigi Gaisuke, huh…?"

2

If you're someone who's ever tried their hand to any extent in the world of electrical engineering, or someone who's so much as dipped their toes into the world of mechanical engineering, or even someone who's gone so far as to spare a passing glance towards the underbelly of society, then you have, without a doubt, heard of the name *Team*. During that era, (yes, it had already become its own era) there was hardly a walk of life that could avoid them.

One side called them cyber terrorists, the other heralded them as pioneers of the virtual space, some judged them as criminals, and meanwhile others revered them as saviours. However, it can't be said that any of them were ever correct. Conversely, it would be hard to say they were all wrong either. They had simply glimpsed one facet of the truth, I think.

After all, that sort of *Team* had existed. In that world, the uttering of indefinite terms like 'they' and 'those guys' undoubtedly referred to them. Of course, while their existence had become famous, what sort of organisation they were, the reason for their formation, or whether they were even a group in the first place remains officially unknown. *Team* had vanished without leaving a single trace which only further served to cement them as the subject of myth and legend.

That is why,

For example, if I were to claim that the blissful young girl sitting next to me had been their leader, none would have believed me. And if I were to claim that the *Team* that had carried out such wide scale destruction, or who had been the architects of such boundless creation, the *Team* that had been labelled a horde of fanatics had only been a small group of nine people, I should expect the same.

One amongst that group of nine was the man we were heading to

meet.

Namely, Utsurigi Gaisuke.

How it was that Kunagisa came to know Utsurigi and the other seven, or for what motive their criminal mischief was carried out (although it was probably a little too destructive to call it that) is something I don't know. And as it was currently beyond the scope of my interests, it wasn't something I was about to bring up casually.

No—honestly.

If I were to speak honestly, that wasn't it. Even as an excuse, that was far too convenient and one-sided an explanation. In truth, it had probably been that I simply hadn't wanted to know. About whatever it was that occurred in that blank space that had formed between Kunagisa and me. I had no desire to tell her about it, and if something happened to her, I had no desire to know.

Kunagisa Tomo.

My one and only friend.

I was still living in Kobe when I met her. Back when I was thirteen, before I was all washed-up. Five years since then— no, it's already closer to six. For half a year, this blue girl and I spent our time together, and once that half-year ended, we parted. Without keeping in touch, five years had passed, only to be reunited a couple of months ago.

Five years.

That was plenty of time for a person to change. However, in the end I remained largely the same. Kunagisa as well, just like back then, she was mostly unchanged. With the exception that, during that time, Kunagisa had gone on to build an unthinkable career, and unknown to me, she had amassed eight comrades, and unknown to me, she and those eight comrades had gone their separate ways.

When Kunagisa talked about them, she looked truly happy. When she

would tell me about Ayanami Hyou, the Chee-kun who could grasp the galaxy, or this time when she explained all about her Sacchan, Utsurigi Gaisuke, she looked truly happy. As if they were her pride and joy, she looked truly happy.

That was somewhat hard for me to swallow.

For some reason or another, it was hard to swallow.

"In other words, plain old jealousy, huh…?"

I felt like that wasn't quite right, but it probably wasn't wrong enough to warrant correction either. I wasn't saintly enough to forgive anything and everything, and I also wasn't understanding enough to feel Kunagisa's joy and happiness as my own. Truth be told, it was hard to say that I harboured any positive feelings at all for those eight, who had occupied a position closer to Kunagisa than I had. I wouldn't go so far as to say it was animosity, but at the very least, this feeling certainly wasn't one of fondness.

However-

However, in the moment, what I felt much more strongly than this gloomy feeling was-

"Man, what a bummer…"

"How come?"

I hadn't intended for anyone else to hear, but Kunagisa picked up on my muttering. Of course, this being Kunagisa, she hadn't taken her eyes off her pocket computer. Kunagisa was so remarkable at multitasking that one couldn't help but wonder if she didn't actually have thousands of brains rattling around up there. Back in the day, she had pulled off the stunt of operating one hundred and twenty eight computers at the same time. So if I thought about it like that, then performing a trick like this was probably easy. It's not as if she wasn't able to concentrate, it's that she was able to split her concentration every which way and then some and still have concentration left to spare.

In other words, when all that concentration was focused towards a single truth— something like waging war on the entire world would've been child's play.

"What's a bummer, Iichan? Or is that some kind of pun about how your butt's gotten sore? Heh, that's funny. You're funny, Iichan."

"I wouldn't joke like that… I'm just talking to myself. No need to worry about it."

"Then I won't. But you know, Iichan, you don't have to be so anxious. Sacchan doesn't mess with people he doesn't care about y'know."

"That's good to hear, but what I'm anxious about lies elsewhere…"

"You mean, you're anxious about Professor Kyouichirou's place?"

"If I had to say, then yeah. Something like that."

I nodded.

Shadou Kyouichirou's research facility. If we were to go off Chee-kun's info, then the place where Utsurigi Gaisuke was currently employed as a research fellow was one of Japan's finest, an undiluted research facility with no private backing. I had heard of the prestige of this research organisation many times over, and what's more, I remembered it. I remembered it. For this brain of mine that's so unreliable that you might think it's composed entirely of resistors, it was a miraculous occurrence. Which is to say, it served as proof to the amount of apprehension I felt towards the facility. Even more than that, the head researcher at the facility, Shadou Kyouichirou himself, held a level of fame that rivalled even *Team*.

Mad Demon Kyouichirou.

As you can probably guess from his moniker, while he was the kind of researcher who was widely known, that doesn't necessarily mean he was widely respected. Biomathematics, theoretical mechanics, behavioural ecology, molecular theory, etcetera, etcetera, he traversed multiple disciplines

and served as a pioneer in many different fields. With a background like that, bolstered by the disposition of the man himself, he became well known as an eccentric scientist in a class all his own. He was currently sixty three years old, but even in his advanced age, he was still actively pursuing his research at the facility.

"Professor Kyouichirou's an acquaintance of yours, right?

"Yup. Still, that's from before I had even met Iichan though. I was around twelve, I think."

"Hmm… twelve, huh?"

"But at the time, the research facility was in Hokkaido… I went with Nao-kun."

"Oh, really?"

"Yup. Nao-kun still had free time back then."

The Nao-kun in question was Kunagisa's brother, Kunagisa Nao. He had such a well-adjusted personality that it was hard to imagine that he and Kunagisa Tomo shared the same parents. Six years ago, I'd come under his care and caused him quite a bit of trouble. Nao was currently working for his father (in other words, Kunagisa's father as well although she had long since been cut off) as a private secretary and was well on his way to becoming an upstanding member of society, and as such, we didn't get many chances to see him.

"Even back then, Professor Kyouichirou had been prone to anger, but ever since, it seems he's been getting more and more twisted. His publications have been barred countless times by higher-ups, so he conceals his location and continues his research with only an elite few. He's pretty strange."

"You're one to talk."

"The strange recognize the strange," Kunagisa said, looking a little proud. "The devil you know, and all that. No, I guess in this case it'd be 'the

Demon you know.'"

"Right…" I nodded absentmindedly. "So, essentially, he's like a mad scientist, yeah?"

"Yup. Like a mad scientist."

"It's just… you know. Going as far as moving deep into the mountains like this makes you wonder. Just what kind of research is he doing?"

"Seven years ago, if I were to put it simply, he was working on artificial intelligence. Although, that's really simplifying it. Yup, at the time, A.I. was all the rage. I'm not sure if you'd call it a *boom*, but it was definitely one of those passing fads. Although, what the professor was working on was a little different than all that."

"I've made some rudimentary chatbots as well. When I was studying abroad, that is."

"As long as we're talking about stuff like that, then I've made a fair few myself. Out of all of us, Hiichan liked them the most though. He would always say *talking to a human partner, and typing away to a chatbot are similar in the sense that both are rudimentary*."

"This guy sounds pretty rotten too…"

"True enough. The only good egg was probably me. Anyways, when I met him last, the professor was working on the research and development of A.I. as a whole, I think. Nothing stays in vogue forever though, so I heard a rumour that the professor's passion for A.I. has waned as of late. I'm not sure what he's working on right now, but his roots are in cybernetics, so it's probably still something to do with that."

"Hmm…"

"Either way, as usual, it's probably something that can't get any funding. That's just who he is. Always has been."

Kunagisa seemed bored as she pursed her lips a little almost as if she was pouting. This was a rare delivery for Kunagisa Tomo. I knew it was Utsurigi that had her feeling this way, so I didn't comment on it. I had no intention of saying anything.

I shut up and continued driving.

"But Iichan, there's really nothing to worry about. If the professor doesn't care about someone, then he has absolutely no interest in them. His personality is genuinely awful, but if you just stick with me, you should be fine. As long as you're by my side."

"Is that so? That's certainly something to be grateful for then."

Of course, she was probably right. To people like Utsurigi '*Malignant Green'* Gaisuke or *The Mad Demon*, Shadou Kyouichirou, a mere university student like myself wouldn't even come into consideration. Given my previous experiences, I had become well aware of that fact, so I wasn't all too worried about it. I hadn't told Kunagisa, and I had no intention of doing so, but my worry stemmed from a different place entirely. It was a fear that was bound to come true before long. Perhaps within a day or two.

"… still …what a bummer."

After all, that too was something that I had no choice but to leave up to chance. There was nothing to be done. My life amounted to nothing more than these kinds of paltry worries, being carried along whichever way the current took me. It's not like I was particularly unhappy about that. Just a little uneasy, that's all.

"Hm-? Looks like we're in Aichi. Well then, take the next left, Iichan."

"You sure? That would take us even deeper into the mountains."

It had been quite some time since the paved road we were driving on had turned into a dirt one, and if you looked out the window, all you would see is Japanese Redwood. If you were someone with hay fever, it was the kind

of sight that would send a shiver down your spine. Being placed in an environment like this would have you doubting whether deforestation was really such a problem after all.

"The facility is in the heart of the mountains. From here on out, nothing shows up on any of our maps, so we'll have to rely on memory."

"Hmm… fine I suppose. If you're navigating then it shouldn't be an issue, but how much longer is it going to be? Depending on the distance, we may have to start thinking about refuelling soon. This car really does lack horsepower."

"Just a little further. It should be near the border of Mie and Aichi. Speaking of, Aichi's really nice. It's full of smart people, y'know."

"Is that so?"

"Yup. It's the birthplace of Space Invaders' Nagoya Attack Strategy, for one. It's said that the soil itself is blessed. I think that's the reason the professor ended up choosing Aichi as the location for his new laboratory. Not that he was trying to reap any of its benefits though. He shouldn't have had any money troubles, I think. Ah- whatever, I can't wait. It's been such a long time since I've seen Sacchan."

"That's all well and good, but please try and think about what you're gonna do after you get to see him. You didn't come all the way to Aichi, just to do some sightseeing, did you? I don't plan on being much help this time around either."

"Hm? What's that? Is that jealousy I hear?" Kunagisa snickered, looking all too pleased. "You may seem all dispassionate, but you're pretty possessive, aren't you, Iichan? When it comes to things that are important to you, you're- I don't know- narrow-minded? You can relax, y'know. I obviously like Sacchan and Chee-kun, but the only one I love is Iichan."

"How precious, but I'm not jealous. It's something different. Or so I say, but when I think about it, it's probably something similar… Oh-"

I spotted a figure ahead of us which drew my attention forwards. A pair of men wearing what looked like security uniforms appeared, waving glowing red traffic wands and beckoning for us to stop. Looking closer, I noticed a large iron fence behind them that would probably be better described as a gate.

Security guards. This deep in the mountains.

"………………"

Stepping on the brake, I brought the car to a halt before slowly rolling down the window. As I did, the two guards approached the Fiat and called out to me threateningly,

"From here on out, this is private property. Entry is forbidden. Please promptly return the way you came."

His manner of speaking was polite, but his tone was exceptionally harsh. Well, I suppose anyone's would be, having to stand around in a place like this in this awful heat. It wouldn't be fair to complain about something as trivial as that. It wasn't my place to judge their lack of professionalism. Moreover, whether their attitudes constituted a lack of professionalism in the first place was up for debate.

"No, uhh, you see. We have an appointment with Professor Kyouichirou."

"With the professor? W-well, in that case, you're Kunagisa?"

The guard's tone changed in an instant. They probably hadn't expected someone of Kunagisa's background to be travelling in such a beater, although it probably wouldn't be right to fault them for that either.

"I'm not Kunagisa, but I'm…accompanying her,"

I said, gesturing to Kunagisa in the passenger seat with my thumb. The actual Kunagisa was, as usual, focused on her pocket computer and didn't even attempt to meet the guards' gaze. However, as if the blue hair was

identification enough, "understood," the guard nodded.

"Well then, I suppose that means you're Miss Kunagisa's friend… although there should be one more person, a chaperone…?"

"Ah- then…" I turned my thumb which was still pointing at Kunagisa towards the backseat, "…should I wake her up?"

"……………No, that'll be fine,"

The security guard responded after a few moments of silence. That was definitely the wiser choice. After all, no one wants to tread on landmines any harder than they have to.

"Well then, I'd like to ask you to fill out your names in our visitor registry. It may seem like a bother, but it's part of the procedure."

"Sure."

With Kunagisa being how she was, and with Suzunashi being even worse, I supposed it was up to me. I opened the door and stepped out of the car. A guard set off towards the building next to the gate which seemed like their guard post. It was a prefab building. Just looking at it from the outside made me sweat. When he returned, he was holding a clipboard with a piece of A4 paper attached to it. Then, "please sign," he handed me a ballpoint-pen. I was certain that I was gonna have to fill in some information on a computer or something, so I was a little taken aback by the old-school approach.

"…For a research facility like this, it seems you guys still use some pretty old systems, huh?"

"Yes, I think so too. However, the professor says *they can't tamper with it, if it's like this*. If it was controlled by a computer or something, then someone from outside could get unauthorised access. I don't really understand, but in any case, he says that *handwriting on paper* is the safest way of preserving data."

"I can't say I don't understand where he's coming from, but that does

seem awfully cautious…"

I said, filling out Kunagisa's name, Suzunashi's name, and my own. Now… the address. In Suzunashi's case, I wasn't sure what I should write. Would it be fine to just put *Hiei Mountain, Enryoukuji Temple*? I couldn't just write down *no registered address*, so it might have to suffice, but I also felt that *resident of Hiei Mountain* and *no registered address* sounded equally shady. After getting lost in a series of thoughts that would probably cause great offence to those who lived on Hiei Mountain, I finally put down that Suzunashi and I lived at the same address. The thought was so chilling that I couldn't even joke about it, but I figured the lie itself was outrageous enough to get a laugh out of.

"Have you brought anything dangerous?" One of the guards asked while I was still lost in thought. The other one continued. "Bringing in any blades or drugs is prohibited…"

"Blades…? I mean we have stuff like scissors…" I answered. "No good, huh? …he certainly is cautious…"

"No, if that's all, it should be fine. My apologies, please don't take this the wrong way. The level of security has been raised since yesterday. We're required to ask these questions to everyone, even Miss Kunagisa and her associates."

"They raised the security? How come?"

"Ahh… well…" The guard seemed conflicted. And then, lowering his voice, he continued. "It's just a little… you know. It happened yesterday. There was a scare that an outsider had gotten in."

"An intruder?" I muttered under my breath. That certainly didn't sound pleasant. To use a term like intruder in relation to a research facility like this made me wonder if it was some kind of spy engaged in industrial espionage or something. Almost like it was straight out of a book or movie, it was the kind of thought that was thoroughly divorced from reality; however, given that this place was also divorced from reality (at the very least, a

research facility deep in the mountains was already fairly absurd), if you were to say it was fitting, then I suppose it was. Or rather, I suppose I should be relieved that the reason that they were taking all these precautions wasn't because *Kunagisa Tomo is coming*.

"Yeah. Look, it's the first name on the list." The guard who I'd given the clipboard to passed it back as he spoke. "The bastard had the nerve to walk right through this gate. They passed themselves off as a guest from another research facility. To trespass in such an obvious manner, I'm not sure whether to call it bold, cocky, or downright stupid…"

"...And? Has this intruder already been caught?"

"Ah, no… not yet…" his answer was awkward. "However, please rest assured. It seems they have already fled the facility, so it's nothing that should cause trouble for Miss Kunagisa and her associates. Moreover, the incident has already been reported to the police, so their arrest is only a matter of time."

That's a relief then. I nodded. Intruders and spies were a dangerous thing, but if they had already left, then it had nothing to do with the story at hand. Whether the police ended up catching them didn't matter. So long as he wasn't here, that alone was good enough. The tale had gotten convoluted enough as is, so I'd rather hold off on any new character introductions.

"If you follow this route along the mountain, there should be a wide enough space for you to park. Please leave your car there. We've arranged for someone from the facility to meet you, so please follow his directions after that. It should only take five minutes to reach the facility from the parking lot."

"Understood. Thank you very much for your kindness."

I bowed my head. Then, for no reason in particular, truly for no reason in particular, my eyes landed on the name of the intruder written at the top of the clipboard. Naturally, an intruder wouldn't write their real name on a registry, so they must have used a fake one. What kind of pseudonym they

had used must have piqued my interest a little.

And there. My gaze stopped.

"…This name."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. It's a pretty strange one, isn't it? I thought it was suspicious, but… I suppose there's no use saying that now…" the guard complained. "…Still, that name, how are you supposed to read it? *Reisaki Aishiki*?"

"No… it's *Zerozaki Itoshiki*, I believe,"

I said, returning the clipboard. Then, "farewell," I returned to the car. The security guards ran off towards the gate and began preparing it to open. I restarted the engine on the Fiat that had been brought to an idle stop.

"Huh? Iichan, did something happen? You seem a little tilted. Like almost seventy five degrees."

"No. They let us through with no issues. There's no problem at all," I said blankly. "There's nothing for you to worry about."

I got the car moving and passed through the gate. As I was following the path that I had been given, "those guards from before," once again a voice came from behind me,

"I wonder what they thought when they saw us."

"…Please make it clear whether you're sleeping or awake, Suzunashi."

"I'm awake now at least. Isn't that enough? You can't really sleep in a place like this anyway. More importantly, what do you think, Inoji? From a third-party's perspective, how do you think we look?"

"Who knows? We certainly don't look like Lupin's crew at least," unable to tell what she was getting at, I gave an evasive answer. "What do you think, Suzunashi?"

"Me? For a second it made me think of The Wizard of Oz."

"The Wizard of Oz?" An unexpected answer. I titled my head curiously. "What kind of story was that again? Umm, If I remember correctly, the protagonist was Oz, wasn't it?"

"That's wrong, Iichan. What do you mean, *if I remember correctly*? We've gotta get you out of the habit of making up believable lies when you don't know what you're talking about," Kunagisa cut in still without looking away from her pocket computer. "If Oz was the protagonist, the whole point of view would have been flipped. The protagonist was Dorothy."

"But the protagonist of Anne of Green Gables is Anne isn't it? And Tom's the protagonist of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, right?"

"That's not a rule or anything."

"Well then, what kind of story is it?"

"Um," Kunagisa nodded once, "It's a story about a girl named Dorothy who gets swept away by a tornado to a strange land called Oz. There, she goes on an adventure with a scarecrow, a lion, and a tin-man."

"So, Momotaro?"

"No, The Wizard of Oz. Try and listen when people are talking, Iichan."

"I am. So these four people… well, I guess three of them aren't exactly people. Anyway, these four go on a journey to defeat the Wizard of Oz, huh? Gotcha."

"Not to defeat him… Dorothy goes to make a wish. *Please send me home*."

"Huh. Sounds peaceful. Peaceful, or carefree, or… tranquil maybe?" For some reason or other, I felt uneasy about that fact, but I did my best not to let it show. "Still, that's all well and good for Dorothy, but why did the other

three go? Did they at least get some dango or something?”

“They each had their own reasons, wishes that they wanted granted by the Wizard. For example, for the Lion, it was *I want Courage.* For the Scarecrow, it was *I want a brain.* It’s a story about everyone persevering through hardship for the sake of their wishes.”

“I can’t tell if that counts as being self-reliant, or being overly dependent…” I peered over at the back seat. “So? Why are we Dorothy and friends? Or rather, what’s the casting look like?”

“Who knows…? I just kind of thought we were. I’m not sure what to tell you. Hmm… *casting*, huh? Well, first off, I’ll take the scarecrow. ‘Cause I wish my brain was smart,” Suzunashi said, still sprawled out. I thought that you were supposed to sit up while talking, but it seemed like Suzunashi followed her own set of logic. “And Inoji, you’re the tin-man.”

“The tin-man?” I turned to Kunagisa. “Tomo, what did the tin-man wish for?”

Without any trace of anything, she answered, “a heart.” When I turned back to Suzunashi, she was wearing an unpleasant smirk. Now I get it. That must have been what she was trying to say. Half-exasperated, half-helpless, I was dejected to find that such roundabout ways of lecturing had existed as well.

“Ah— but that’s just one of those things, y’know,” said Kunagisa. “Thinking that the heart and mind are two different things sure makes for a good story. It’s completely fantastical after all.”

“You’re saying it’s a fantasy?”

“Yup. If it’s not fantasy, what else would you call it? I mean, what we usually refer to as *having a heart* or *a soul*, is just the result of physical processes in the brain, right? Isn’t that what the entire field of artificial intelligence is built on?”

Kunagisa explained, as if stating the obvious. No, to Kunagisa it was

probably self-evident. I didn't particularly feel like adding anything, so I offered my agreement with a simple "yeah."

All the while, thinking that she might've been a little like the young girl who longed for home.

"…………"

But in that case-

In that the case, who on earth was the cowardly lion, I wondered.

3

I parked the Fiat in the lot and took the keys out of the ignition. Glancing over at the fuel gauge, the amount remaining seemed dicey. Whether we could even get the car down the mountain was starting to look doubtful. If worse came to worst, we would have to borrow some gas from the folks at the lab, but I wasn't sure if they even had any. Looking around the lot, I couldn't find a single car aside from Miiko's Fiat. Faculty parking was probably somewhere else, but if not, we'd probably be walking home, I thought while stepping out of the car.

Looking up, the sky looked odd. There weren't any dark clouds rolling in, but still, it gave the impression that tomorrow, or even as soon as this evening, we'd be getting some rain. I felt uneasy as though it were somehow hinting at things to come.

If you want to predict tomorrow's weather, you just need to say 'it'll be something like today.' I can't remember whose words they were, but I certainly remembered the proverb. If that was indeed the case, then my experience at this facility would be the same as all the ones that came before. It was a chilling premonition.

"Now then…"

According to the security guard, someone should be coming here to get us. As I thought that, I looked around and spotted a lone figure to our east. I couldn't make out what he looked like given the distance, but seeing as he was wearing a white lab coat, I figured he must've been the researcher who was here to pick us up. He seemed to notice us as well and began walking over to where we were.

"Hello,"

I said raising my right hand, but I got no response. He just continued

his approach in silence.

His height and physique were similar to my own, not particularly tall, not particularly short. He was simply average. As he got closer, I noticed that he was oddly young. By any estimation, he was younger than I was, and not just by a year or two; he had the juvenile features of someone in his early teens. And yet, in a manner unbefitting of such a baby face, a sinister gaze lurked just behind his glasses. It betrayed his youthfulness. Of course, this world holds such things as twenty-seven-year-old maids who look like they couldn't possibly be older than middle schoolers, so I couldn't exactly discern his age from appearance alone.

Without showing any signs of slowing down, he closed the gap between us before finally grinding to a halt right in front of my eyes. In this case, when I say *right in front of my eyes*, I don't mean it as some kind of metaphor or exaggeration. He had honestly gotten so close that if I were to lean forward even a little bit, we would have been touching. That's not all. He had brought that baby face of his mere millimetres away from my own. The distance between us was such that, if my partner were not a man, one would think that he was going in for a kiss.

As I stood still, desperately thinking about what I should do in a situation like this, his nose twitched two or three times as if he had smelled something rotten, and then, "hmph," he snorted.

"So you're *Cluster*'s very own Kunagisa Tomo, huh?"

It wasn't just rude, his tone was one that indicated contempt. However, as his looks suggested, he sounded incredibly young, so while I was certainly surprised, it was hard to take too much offence.

"No, I'm not. I'm something like her attendant, or her interpreter," I took a step back, putting some space between us as I spoke, "or to use the old-fashioned term, I'm her chauffeur."

"Huh? What're you talking about? I didn't hear anything about this. No one told me that there'd be someone like you tagging along. Then where

the hell is Kunagisa Tomo?" Like he was trying to pick a fight, he furrowed his brow and pressed me for information. "I can't see him anywhere."

"In the shade of the car. Look, right there," I said, pointing to the other side of the Fiat where Kunagisa, clinging to her pocket computer and all sorts of other belongings, was stepping out of the car. "She's the cute girl over there."

"Huh? What? Kunagisa Tomo's a woman? You're kidding, right?"

He looked genuinely shocked as he spoke. This time he approached Kunagisa, cutting in front of the Fiat. Kunagisa cocked her head at the appearance of this unknown man, but he simply gazed at her with a "hmmm" before lightly prodding at her blue hair, yet Kunagisa still didn't show any sign of resistance. Typical, she really lacked any sense of wariness about people. It seems that, in modern society, there are those who've never been struck by their parents, but if I had to say, Kunagisa was the type who wouldn't have noticed even if she had.

"But she doesn't seem that smart. She's just an immature kid, isn't she? Hey you, are you really Kunagisa Tomo from *Cluster*?"

"Really. The name's Kunagisa Tomo. No matter how you slice it, I'm Kunagisa Tomo. I came to see Sacchan."

"Huh? Sacchan? What the hell are you talking about…?"

"What a load of rubbish," he spat and thrust his hands into the pockets of his oversized lab coat, then he took off ahead of us at a brisk pace. He didn't tell us to follow him, but that was probably what he intended.

"Seriously, a kid… Not just a woman, but a kid too. God this sucks. This is the absolute worst."

"You know, in my eyes, you're just a kid yourself, Ougaki Shito."

He froze.

He… Shito stopped dead in his tracks. And like that, he was still for about three seconds. Finally, he turned to face me. "How do you know my name?"

"Hmm? Well, you see, despite her looks, she's nineteen, so I thought it was a weird thing for a sixteen-year-old, like yourself, to call her. You're right that she's a woman, but at the very least, when compared to you, she's no kid."

"That's not what I'm asking about, is it!? *Despite her looks*? I don't give a damn about that!" He stomped his foot. "Why do you know my name!? My age too! I don't remember telling you shit!"

"It's not like your name is all we know," I replied with an indifferent shrug. "About Professor Kyouichirou, about his secretary Uze Misachi, about the researchers Koutari Hinayoshi, Neo Furuara, and Kasugai Kasuga, I think we know plenty."

"You're leaving someone out, Iichan. You're always so forgetful, aren't you?" Kunagisa piped up beside me. "There are four researchers besides the professor and Sacchan. You forgot one."

"Ahh… now that you mention it, there is, isn't there? That's right, that's right. How careless of me." I nodded at Kunagisa. "Right, there's also Miyoshi Kokoromi. Now then, that should be everyone. So? Do you have any questions, Shito?"

"…Who are you? Just who the hell are you two? How do you know all that?" far from looking puzzled, he spoke in a tone that made it seem like he was ready to lunge at us depending on how we answered. He glared at me. "That's supposed to be classified information. It's not something someone like you should know. How did you find out?"

"I wonder. It's a trade secret, so I won't be telling you. I just wanted to let you know that making superficial judgements about Kunagisa Tomo bothers me. So I'd thank you-"

‘*-kindly not to do that from now on,*’ I had meant to finish, but my condescension was cut short by a strong blow to the back of the head. When I turned around, there towered Suzunashi with her fists still clenched. Next I ate a flick to the forehead, straight-on. She had marvellous technique, so it hurt a fair deal. Suzunashi must’ve gotten out of the car without me noticing.

“What the hell are you doing? Jeez, bragging about things you didn’t even do.” As if she had just woken up, Suzunashi was in a rotten mood. “Is that how you get your kicks? Picking on children? I thought you were better than that.”

And then she struck my head again lightly, and half-by-force, she pushed my head down until I was bowing. Then, addressing Shito, “apologies,” she said.

“This kid has a bad habit of getting all worked up over anything involving Kunagisa. He’s a stupid bastard, but please forgive him. He’s remorseful too, as you can see. He’ll be getting a harsh lecture from me later this evening, so please pardon him for the time being.”

I had been punched, I had been flicked, and now, I was going to be lectured.

“…Uhhh…No, it’s…” Taken aback by Suzunashi forcing my head down, Shito seemed unsure of what to do next. “It’s not really, uhh, I mean, I don’t really mind…”

“Thank goodness. Well, that’s settled for now.” With that, Suzunashi finally released me. “So then, I suppose we should have you guide us to the research facility or whatever as soon as possible. My whole body’s already aching something fierce. I’m these two’s chaperone, Suzunashi Neon. Pleasure to meet you.”

“… I’m Ougaki Shito. I’m here as Professor Kyouichirou’s assistant. Pleasure to meet you.”

He curtly introduced himself to Suzunashi and then began walking

once again. This time we all went after him. To the north of the parking lot, there was a narrow wooded path which we followed. It was a little like hiking. The path wasn't especially steep, but it was by no means flat, so I took care of Kunagisa's belongings. When I slung her bags over my shoulder, the impact caused pain to cascade across the back of my head. As expected of *Blackout Suzunashi*, she really didn't pull her punches. She might've even cracked the skull. That being said, with regards to the whole affair earlier, my attitude was unmistakably mistaken, so I couldn't find it in me to complain.

It was as Suzunashi had said. Such a minor slight towards Kunagisa wasn't something for me to get so worked up over. I knew that. What's more, even the person in question, Kunagisa herself, had been completely unbothered by it. Even now, to the usually confined Kunagisa, the trail decorated by cedar on both sides must've been a rare sight, so she seemed to be enjoying herself just taking in the view. There wasn't a trace of hurt to be found. And so, by letting it upset me, I couldn't even say that I had been acting out of a sense of loyalty.

"I really am narrow-minded when it comes to what's important…I give up already."

For the time being, I ought to own up to it. Turning to Kunagisa, "my bad," I said. She didn't seem to understand why I was apologising and cocked her head with a "hmm?" but that was only for a moment before her heart was once again captured by the trees. Suzunashi glanced at me with a look that seemed to say, 'good grief,' but as soon as I noticed it, she tipped her hat sharply, hiding her gaze.

"Oi, you."

Suddenly.

From two metres ahead of me, Shito, who had been wordlessly proceeding like some kind of scout, called out to me.

"You, come here for a second."

"I'd prefer if you'd stop calling me *you*…I'm older than you after all… I'm nineteen."

"Shut it. Who cares? Seniority ain't worth jack **here**. It doesn't matter how old you are so long as you're smart. And since I'm smarter than you, you should be the one showing me respect."

"…………" Shito's actually a pretty simple guy, huh? I thought as I walked over to him. "What is it? Have you got a question for me?"

"Yeah, a question…" He lowered his voice. "The big one in black, is that a man? A woman?"

"………" I glanced back at Suzunashi for a second then immediately turned back to face Shito, and in a hushed tone, "A woman, more or less."

"Yeah? So she's a woman after all? Thank god." He nodded, convinced. "She's huge. How tall is she exactly?"

"One hundred and eighty nine centimetres. Apparently, she stopped measuring when she was sixteen though, so she might be even taller. Still, once you go past one eighty five, it may as well not even count. I wish she'd spare about ten centimetres for me."

"…Amazing. It's like…" Shito looked genuinely impressed. "Did she play volleyball, or basketball or something? Does she have relatives from somewhere else? I don't even think foreigners get that tall usually."

"She says she's pure Japanese… Maybe it's because she's blood-type A?"

"…huh. …man, **there's no mistaking her** at least. Not like that."

Shito mournfully looked up at the sky.

Suzunashi was quite slender, and neither her frame nor features were particularly masculine, so I personally couldn't imagine her as a man. That being said, with every inch of her imposing stature clad in black, along with

the hat pulled over her eyes, I could see how it might be difficult to tell her gender from a glance. She sounded decidedly feminine, but we were living in an age where that, by itself, didn't prove anything. I won't name any names, but this world held unrivalled beauties who nonetheless spoke in an unbelievably crude and masculine manner.

"There."

Shito pointed ahead of him.

"The facility is just beyond that wall."

"Huh…?"

When I turned my gaze as directed, beyond the trees, liable to spoil the whole scenery, was a crude brutalist concrete wall. As if they had drawn a large circle, and then the mountain was carved out around it. Even from this distance, I could tell that it was unusually tall; rather than the research facility of an eminent scholar, this felt like something else entirely. Right, if I had to put it into words-

"It's like a prison…"

"A prison? Not at all. You've got no sense," Shito said proudly. "This is a stronghold. An impenetrable stronghold. And that? That's the castle wall."

"A castle wall…"

Certainly, deep in these mountains, with the footholds being as awful as they were, this was a hard to attack yet easily defendable position. Does that mean that something worth going to all that trouble to protect was housed within this facility? And still, despite what Shito had said, I still couldn't see it as anything other than a prison wall. Not to deny entry from outside, but as if it were to prevent escape from within…

"It's like the *final barrier*… speaking of, Shito. I heard from security that, yesterday or the day before, someone broke into the facility."

"Ah. Yeah, it certainly seems that way. I don't know much about it though. I only caught a glimpse of their back from far away." With a nasty expression, Shito sneered as he spoke. "Even still, honestly, what an idiot. In the end, they hightailed it out of here without even taking anything. Don't take the security around here lightly."

"But they got in, didn't they?"

"Sure, they got in. I'll admit it," Shito shrugged his shoulders, "but we don't allow anything more. That's the kind of system we have in place. Either way, the bastard's learned their lesson by now, so they won't be back again. They entered empty-handed anyways, so I doubt they'd have the nerve to pull anything."

"Empty-handed?"

Ah, that's right, isn't it? The *intruder* strolled right through the front gate after all, so it's only natural that security performed a body-check. That must've been what he had meant. Then it was as Shito said, this guy was unbelievably stupid. Either that or the complete opposite, and they were just unbelievably self-assured. I wondered which it was.

If not self-assurance, then perhaps conviction.

"Huh? What's the matter?" Noticing my sudden silence, Shito's face twisted into a look of suspicion. "Just who are you? You're awfully interested in this intruder, aren't you? You wouldn't happen to know the guy?"

"Not a chance. Say what you want, but there's no way there'd be such a convenient twist. Where did you even get such a cockamamie idea?"

"It's just a joke. What are you getting so worked up about, nineteen-year-old?"

"My bad, sixteen-year-old."

The exchange seemed far from one that a nineteen-year-old and a sixteen-year-old ought to be having. With a huff, Shito returned to his silence.

Perhaps he was trying to figure out what *cockamamie* meant. In truth, I had used the word without really knowing myself, so if he'd asked me to explain, I would've been at a loss.

Still, Shito was awfully harsh when it came to the intruder (although I suppose that's to be expected, coming from one of the people being intruded upon), but even though it had ended in failure, wasn't merely breaking into a facility like this already a big deal? Suppose this intruder hadn't been empty handed, in that case perhaps—

I placed my hand on my chest. To be precise, I placed my hand over the right breast pocket on the summer-jacket that I was wearing over my shirt. If I were to be even more precise, I was confirming that the thin knife hidden inside was still there.

It's not as if I had outright lied to the guards back at the gate. In my left pocket, I did indeed have a pair of scissors. While I'm at it, the backpack that was slung over my shoulders also contained a can opener along with Kunagisa's favourite tinned bear meat. No matter how you looked at it, I hadn't lied. I don't recall saying a single word about not having a knife after all. Even still, in this case, I doubt I could avoid being labelled a liar.

This knife was something that I had received from a contractor acquaintance of mine a week ago while preparing for this trip. *A contractor acquaintance of mine* is a phrase that reeked of bullshit, even to me, but given that it was the truth I suppose there's no way around it. The knife and its holster were part of a set. The holster was fashioned into the inside of the jacket in such a way that, at a glance, it would be imperceptible; it was a remarkably simple design. Of course, if I had undergone a body-check it would have been found out almost immediately, but I had bet on the guards being reluctant to perform one of Kunagisa and her associates. It was a gamble with slightly worse than fifty-fifty odds, but it seemed like I had been right on the money.

"It may not look like it, but that knife's stupidly sharp, so try not to wave it at anyone," the contractor— Aikawa had said. "It should cut as well as *Black Jack*'s scalpel. You could even use it to carve through stone."

I was extremely grateful for Aikawa's concern, but it was likely wasted effort on her part. I don't know about the intruder, but in my hands, I felt like a single knife (or scissors or can-opener) wouldn't make all that much of a difference. At the very least, carving through this castle wall with it wasn't worth the consideration. It'd be like trying to get blood from stone.

"Such bittersweet nonsense…"

The nonsense I was referring to was not the notion of taking on an entire castle wall with a single knife. It was me myself, who, despite having confidently declared to Kunagisa that *I don't plan on being much help this time around,* knew in my heart of hearts that I still had every intention of doing everything in my power to make sure things worked out for her. Honestly, I had to wonder if I even had any integrity to speak of. It was enough to make me sick of myself.

"Hey, Shito."

"Huh? What?"

"Utsurigi… Gaisuke, what kind of guy is he?"

"Utsurigi?" Without even disguising his contempt, Shito made a face as if I'd just shown him a dead cat. "Utsurigi, huh?"

"Yeah, Utsurigi Gaisuke."

"…A pervert," he spat, taking two steps further ahead and turning his back on me. I suppose his back was already towards me, so maybe I ought to say he turned his face away instead. "A pervert. **That man** is an irredeemable pervert down to his very bones. What else can you even say about a bastard like him?"

With that, he stomped off ahead looking quite irritated. Unable to bring myself to pry any further, I watched him leave in silence. If possible, I had wanted to stockpile a bit more information on Gaisuke beforehand, but hmm, it seemed best to leave it be. At the very least, I had learned that Shito didn't look too fondly upon Utsurigi.

“…………”

However, what I had really wanted to know was what this Utsurigi Gaisuke guy thought about Kunagisa Tomo.

The path had grown somewhat more arduous than before— which is to say, the mountain’s incline had gotten steeper, so I stopped and waited for Kunagisa. Then, leading Kunagisa by the hand, we continued up the slope.

“I see… this place really is a natural stronghold. No, a fortress. And an incredibly off-putting one, at that. It brings back some particularly awful memories.”

“If you forget the path, you might get lost on your way back. Be careful, Iichan. Don’t go running off on your own, now. Your hippocampus’ basically Swiss cheese after all. If anyone other than Jun-chan got lost on a mountain like this they’d be toast for sure. They’d get eaten by wild animals, so don’t leave my side. ‘Kay?”

“Got it. I’ll definitely keep that in mind. Still, seriously, it feels like a bear, or a boar, or something could jump out at any moment…”

“Inoji. Speaking of, is it true that boars evolved from pigs?”

“Not in the slightest. Who told you that rubbish?”

“Asano. She said that boars are just pigs that escaped from their farms and had been reclaimed by nature. Incidentally, she said that she heard it from you.”

“Oof.”

“Iichan, you’re such a liar. It’s actually pigs that came from boars, Neon-chan. The complete opposite. But rather than evolution, they were artificially domesticated by people. Kinda like the carp, or the goldfish. That’s why pigs are actually pretty strong. Because they used to be boars. Yup, if you were to pit a person against a pig, the pig would probably win. Lately, I hear they’re even working on anti-personal pigs.”

“Hmm, artificial huh… Then does that mean you could artificially domesticate a monkey into a person?”

“No, I don’t think so…”

“It’d probably be easy to turn a person into a monkey though, right?”

“Neon-chan, humans and monkeys are completely different animals. We share a distant ancestor, but that doesn’t mean that monkeys directly became humans. If you could pull that off it would turn the entire ecosystem on its head.”

“Really? Hmm. Hanging out with Blue sure is a learning experience. You’ve taught me a lot. By the way Inoji, that means that thing about how you can look towards the northern sky around September and see penguins in mid-flight over Japan as they migrate between the North and South Poles was a lie too, wasn’t it?”

“I think there are some lies where the fault lies with the deceived.”

“Guys, shut it. We’re here,”

Shito said, so we looked in his direction and found that we were already arriving at the wall. The angle we had glimpsed it from before wasn’t great, so I hadn’t gotten a good look at it until now, but seeing it from up close it was all the more crude, and more than that, it emanated an eerie aura. It couldn’t have been built all too long ago; it wasn’t dirty enough for that to be the case. Rather, it gave me the strange impression that it was brand new. It was paradoxically unnatural and deeply unnerving. Next to Shito, there was an insulated steel door that seemed needlessly sturdy no matter how you look at it. That must’ve been the main entrance. Shito knocked on the door, and then, as if overly-rehearsed, he gave a daring smile.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the research facility of *The Mad Demon,* Shadou Kyouichirou.”

DAY ONE (2) - PENALTY AND PUNISHMENT

0

Tenacity like a cockroach?

Meaning, they die when you whack 'em with a rolled up newspaper?

1

The research facility of the depraved Shadou Kyouichirou— its official name being the lengthy Substituent Branch of the Shadou Kyouichirou Mathematical Theory of Learning, the ALS Research Institute— consisted of eight buildings in total.

Enclosed by high walls in a manner that could hardly be described as spacious, the eight buildings were packed together so tight that if one were to view it from above, it would appear undeniably cramped. However, from what I'd seen having entered the facility myself, the strict order with which they were arranged gave the impression that this was indeed a laboratory. It wasn't as if it sparked any nostalgia in me, but this kind of environment did bring back some memories.

When we passed beyond the wall, I could see one, two, three—as many as four dice-like buildings. When I say they were dice-like, it wasn't because they were especially similar in shape. It's because they didn't have a single window; at a glance it was hard to determine whether the structures could even be called buildings in the first place. Rather than buildings, they were closer to avant-garde art installations. Speaking of, I had heard of companies working on games and the like that carried out their development in windowless buildings as a security measure. I wondered if this was the same kind of idea. If it was, then as I've said over and over again, they

certainly were cautious. I was beginning to understand why the *intruder* had left without managing to accomplish anything.

Shito marched on ahead of us, and of the four dice we had seen, he approached the entrance to the largest, the one that seemed to preside over the others. “Hang on a second.” he produced a key card from his lab coat pocket, and ran it through the card-reader. After that, he input a ten-digit code into the num-pad installed beside the card-reader. I thought that would be enough for the door to open, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“State your name, please.”

A clearly synthesized voice came from a small unseen speaker right above the card-reader. It was the kind of high-tech system that would have been unthinkable after witnessing the primitive system used at the gate.

“Ougaki Shito. ID: ikwe9f2ma444.”

“Voice and retina scan confirmed. Please wait.”

We did as the voice instructed, and then, like an automatic door (If you find the expression a little too redundant, then perhaps *like magic*), the thick insulated door slid open. With a “hmph,” Shito stepped inside before turning to face us.

“Get in, hurry up. It’ll close soon.”

Complying, Kunagisa, Suzunashi, and I stepped into the building. Leading out from the doorway was a white hallway reminiscent of a newly built hospital. Shito guided us along, and as we walked, he spoke.

“This is the Primary Ward, so essentially think of it as an all-purpose central research ward that also serves as Professor Kyouichirou’s living quarters. It’s a hassle to explain any more, so that’s all you get. For now, why don’t we have you meet the professor? Make sure to watch your mouth.”

His abusive language was the same as ever, but at the very least, Shito seemed to be carrying out his responsibilities to the best of his ability. Despite

his rough edges, he was a competent guide.

“The professor’s waiting on the fourth floor. Here, we’re taking the elevator,” Shito said as he pressed the call-button, “and stop glancing around. It’s annoying.”

“Sorry. By the way, Shito.”

“What?”

“Security's pretty tight, isn’t it? The system at the entrance. The lack of windows too.”

“That’s right.” Shito nodded.

“That kind of equipment is standard for a first rate research facility like this. You never know when there could be a rat skulking about after all. Just in case, let me warn you, don’t go and leave the building on your own. If you leave by yourself, there’d be no way back in without assistance.”

“Hmm…”

“Well, that’s probably just needless concern.”

We got in the elevator and headed to the fourth floor. There weren’t any windows, so I had no way of knowing just how many stories this building, the Primary Research Ward, was, but going off of intuition, the fourth floor was probably the last. We stepped out into the hall and, “wait over there,” Shito pointed to what looked like a smoking room.

“I’ll be back after I report to the professor. I’ll call on you soon, so don’t relax too much,”

Shito said before taking off down the hall. In what world does one instruct their guests ‘*please kick your feet up, rest a while. Don’t make yourself at home’?* I thought as I sat down on the smoking room sofa. Kunagisa sat next to me, and Suzunashi sat across. Suzunashi took a pack of cigarettes from her blazer pocket, placed one in her mouth, and lit it with her

Zippo.

"…Ahh finally, I can smoke." Suzunashi looked ecstatic as she puffed on it. "Seriously, that Asano gave me quite an earful about not smoking in her car."

"That's because the smell sticks. There's no helping what can't be helped."

"I guess…I was stressing about what I was gonna do if this place turned out to be non-smoking too. Thank god. Anyway, I was expecting this place to be stranger. Well, I guess the walls outside were plenty weird, but the inside's surprisingly sensible. It's kinda like a university campus."

"On a fundamental level, they're pretty similar after all… Still, it's quite the luxury to have such a huge building all to yourself." To someone like me, who was living out of a four-and-a-half tatami mat apartment, it was truly an enviable position. "Wait, no… weren't there three people using this building?"

"That's right." Kunagisa nodded. "Shito-kun, Misachi-chan, and the professor makes three. It's one person per building for the other research wards though."

"I see." I nodded. Man, my memory was as unreliable as ever. "Well, be that as it may, it's a luxury all the same."

"I'm not just talking about the buildings either," Suzunashi continued, twiddling her cigarette between her fingertips. "The people are awfully sensible as well, or I guess I should call them normal. I got all worked up for nothing."

"Normal?" I tilted my head. "You're calling Shito normal? That's not the impression I got at all, and even then, a sixteen-year-old research assistant should be enough to tell you that this is no normal research facility."

"I was just imagining it would be weirder," Suzunashi said with a peculiar smile. "I pictured them speaking exclusively in programming

languages… or suddenly dosing you with strange and dangerous drugs… or that they would all be walking around stark naked under their lab coats… that kinda thing.”

“You certainly have a rich imagination…”

Be it academics, researchers, or scientists, it seemed that the lenses through which Suzunashi viewed any in such a profession were well and truly warped. If you were to look at it like that, then of course Shito would seem normal. To pass judgement on people based on your own preconceived notions was clearly bad, but to think that such extreme bias could actually lead to inversely positive results- No, this wasn’t the kind of situation that you could glean any moral from.

“Anyway, Tomo. Let’s use this chance to have a bit of a serious discussion. What do you intend to do from now on? Everything’s gone pretty smoothly so far, but you could say that everything up until now has just been *boot-up*, right? We haven’t had anything *freeze* on us yet, but what *keys* do you intend to press next?”

“Mmm… well, I’ve got all sorts of ideas.” Kunagisa leaned back a little and gazed at the ceiling. “Let’s see. First let’s meet with the professor and have a little chat. Let’s put everything else on the backburner for now and have them set up a proper meeting with Sacchan.”

“They’re keeping him in the seventh ward, right?”

“Yup. Not to sound too optimistic or anything, but getting that far shouldn’t be an issue. As for me, I’ll scrape together a few *wildcards* in the meantime.”

“*Wildcards,* huh…?”

As I parroted her words back at her, a certain contractor came to mind. Humanity’s Strongest, the Red Contractor. A bundle of courage with far more than just confidence at her disposal, an exemplar, a paragon, and, without doubt, a *wildcard*. Partial to disguises and manga, and a lover of

mischief, she had a troublesome personality. Still, as an ally, there was no one more reliable.

"Tomo. Wouldn't it have been easier to get Aikawa's help with all this?"

"Mm-hm. Still, you've gotta sort your own business out by yourself. It's no good to trouble people with your friend's problems."

"I'm pretty sure that's her job, though…"

Mid-discussion, just as he had promised, Shito returned in no time at all. "The professor will meet with you," he said, hurrying us along. Suzunashi, who still had half of her cigarette left, had no choice but to put it out in the ashtray; she looked a little disappointed as she did so. I had received special orders from Miiko. *If possible, don't let Suzunashi get too much nicotine*, so I didn't ask Shito to wait for her to finish. Even if I had, it's not like Shito would have listened.

"This way, hurry up."

Shito walked as he spoke before coming to a halt right in front of the door at the end of the wide corridor. Placing his hand on the knob, he turned to face us once more. "Mind your manners," he said.

"Especially you." He singled me out. "This is just my opinion, but you're really weird. Don't say a word."

"You really have no trouble saying awful things, do you? I get it… I don't plan on getting in the way anyway. I know my place."

Responding with a shrug, I glanced at Kunagisa. She didn't seem particularly nervous, or especially excited. Rather, the optimistic expression that she wore was the same as always. She didn't seem to be enjoying herself, instead it was as if her chance meeting with *Mad Demon* Kyouichirou meant nothing to her at all. Of course, it probably didn't. After all, the one that Kunagisa had really wanted to meet was currently in the Seventh Research Ward, Utsurigi Gaisuke.

I sighed.

"Fix your posture. Well then…" Shito said. "Pardon the intrusion, professor."

The door opened.

With Shito leading the way, we stepped into the room. Given the hallway, I had expected the room to have an interior like a hospital, but that wasn't the case at all; with a round table at its centre, it was a decidedly normal looking parlour. Sitting at the table across from us, was him—Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.

Having heard that he was sixty three years old, I had imagined someone more aged, but it appears that those expectations of mine had been pleasantly subverted. As expected, his hair had gone grey, but there was plenty of it, and it showed no signs of receding. And while I wouldn't call his complexion youthful, he still seemed to be brimming with vitality. Given his appearance, his insistence alone would've been enough to convince someone that he was still in his fifties, no, even his forties. And more than anything, the glare he shot us and the expression he wore were certainly not those of an old man, nor were they those of a researcher. Instead, they brought to mind an up-and-coming politician. Crafty, experienced, those kinds of words sprung forth, one after another.

Shadou Kyouichirou

Enough to overwhelm, more than enough to overpower, his stately presence permeated the room.

"Ha-ha,"

The old man laughed.

"It's been a long time—Seven years, has it? Has it really been seven years, Lady Kunagisa?"

It was a hoarse voice. However, it didn't lack for strength. It was the

calm and collected voice of one addressing a subordinate. If you'd forgive the hackneyed expression, it was the voice of one who stood above others.

"You've changed your hairstyle. It's gotten even more childish. It suits you, Lady Kunagisa. You look more childish than you did seven years ago."

"Why, thank you," came Kunagisa's response. "I'm honoured by your praise. I am quite pleased to have been welcomed so warmly, professor."

"Hah. I sense some sarcasm in your tone."

"Is that what you heard? That wasn't what I was going for," Kunagisa shrugged, "but if that's what you heard, then I suppose there must have been."

Standing behind the professor, there was a lone figure, a small-statured woman in a suit. The woman wore a bob cut at shoulder length, and from behind her glasses, with a clerical gaze— I suppose you could call it calculating— she glared at us. The fact that she wasn't wearing a lab coat probably meant she didn't belong to the research team.

If that were the case, then that meant she must've been Professor Kyouichirou's personal secretary, Uze Misachi.

Shito split off from us and headed over to Misachi. He whispered something to her, and then, approaching the professor, he did the same. Listening, the professor nodded two or three times before turning to face us once more.

"Well then," he chuckled, "—at any rate, it's our first meeting in seven years." He turned to Kunagisa. "Naturally, something like seven years isn't all too significant to me, but to you, to someone who's not even twenty, it must have been quite a while. You must have all kinds of burning questions that you've been meaning to ask me, but unfortunately I don't have the time. I'm a busy man after all."

"Burning questions? I can't think of a single thing that I'd want to ask you. Besides, we're both busy. I'm sure you've got a lot on your plate, but I

have work to do as well."

"Right, right. I couldn't be happier for you, Lady Kunagisa. Although, in my world, we wouldn't call anything as unproductive as that work. Well, they do say that, to children, work and play are one in the same."

"If you're suggesting that I'm just playing around, then wouldn't that make two of us? Neither of us are especially productive. You're not still working on mechanical theory, are you? If so, then you must be working awfully hard. Excessively and pointlessly. It doesn't usually take this long to iron out the kinks, does it?"

"You understand nothing, Lady Kunagisa. You don't understand a thing about me."

"Clearly. I think so too. It's as you say, I don't understand a thing."

Kunagisa nodded twice. Nothing about it seemed strange, however for that very reason, something felt off. It didn't feel like the kind of response that would come from the Kunagisa that I knew. Kunagisa would not respond in a manner *that was not* strange.

"Artificial intelligence— or rather, the possibility of artificial life, have you already abandoned it, professor? A little birdie told me you had."

"I did not abandon it. I never abandon anything. I simply realized it was *easier* than I had thought, so I'm taking a little detour to lay the groundwork. I don't want to put forth anything less than a perfect product, after all." Professor Kyouichirou's true thoughts were obfuscated by his crooked sneer. It was a spiteful and wicked expression. "I have no intention of playing around. I'm not some hobbyist. You shouldn't meddle with a scientist's life's work, Lady Kunagisa."

"Of course, I don't intend to. Whatever it is you're working on, I don't plan on getting in the way. How depressingly meaningless."

Kunagisa shrugged once more.

As I thought, something about this attitude was out of keeping with the Kunagisa that I knew. If you had asked me in what way, I wouldn't have been able to tell you, but still, an inexplicable sense of anxiety gradually bubbled forth from within my heart. I knew this was not the occasion to be feeling this way, so I shook my head free of any such thoughts. In moments like this, I chose to think of Hikari. She was awfully cute, wasn't she? I wonder what she's doing now.

"By the way, Lady Kunagisa," Professor Kyouichirou changed the topic, "is your grandfather doing well?"

"—Who knows?" Kunagisa hesitated a moment before responding. "How cruel, professor. What an awful question. You already know, don't you? That I was disowned *after that*. They should have told you."

"Oh my, now that you mention it, I suppose they did. Apologies, I'm getting up there after all. I've grown awfully forgetful." The professor gave a particularly hearty laugh. "They say that no one likes to grow old, but it certainly is true."

"Hmm, is that so? Then research must be hard on you."

"What needless concern. It's not something for children to fret over. It's only my memory that's declined. Nowadays, I'm spoiled rotten with all the devices able to do the remembering in my stead. So long as my mind is still sharp, I'll be certain to live up to your grandfather's expectations, Lady Kunagisa."

It was a truly cynical way of speaking. It was a truly detestable way of speaking. From the way he spoke, his displeasure at having Kunagisa as a guest was apparent. Facing him down, Kunagisa responded in kind such that there wasn't a person alive who could witness the exchange and come away feeling like there was any trace of amicability between the two.

Right. To Professor Kyouichirou, the existence known as *Kunagisa Tomo* was relatively insignificant. Even now, while he may have been entertaining Kunagisa as a guest for the time being, the act was in appearance

alone. Just as what mattered to Kunagisa wasn't Shadou Kyouichirou, but Utsurigi Gaisuke, what mattered to Professor Kyouichirou was Kunagisa's grandfather— or in this case, the Kunagisa House, not Kunagisa herself.

The main family of the Kunagisa House—the Kunagisa Syndicate doesn't need any introduction. One of the few plutocratic houses in Japan— no, it would only be appropriate to call them the model for what all plutocratic houses aspired to be. Between associated businesses and affiliated enterprises, they had amassed over twenty two thousand and two hundred companies, no, in all but name, they had already far surpassed those numbers; they possessed that kind of conglomerate backing. So long as you lived an ordinary, everyday life, you wouldn't even recognize that you were living in their shadow, such was the enormity of their presence which held sway over the entire world; it was a monstrous lineage.

And *they* also happened to be patrons of this research facility.

If you were to liken them to the House of Medici, you wouldn't have been far off, but essentially, with regards to their financing of privately-run research facilities such as this, the arts, or other various technical fields, the Kunagisa household did not spare any expense—that is to say, they were particularly aggressive about such investments. The reason why someone branded a *Mad Demon* such as Shadou Kyouichirou could even establish such an impressive facility and carry on his research like this was because of that very patronage. Of course, the Kunagisa Syndicate wasn't financing his research for appearances' sake or on some whim, and they certainly weren't doing it out of the kindness of their hearts. Instead, it was a means to pre-emptively lay claim to any results or advancements produced by the facility and any royalties that entailed; the ways to recoup their losses were many and varied. In that sense, it might be more accurate to refer to them as investors rather than patrons. And given that the amount of investors willing to fund *The Mad Demon* were few and far between, the Kunagisa house could be considered high-rollers in that regard. Still, for that very reason-

For that very reason, *Kunagisa Tomo and her associates* were allowed to set foot in this institute. No matter how ostracized she may have

been, Kunagisa Tomo was still the granddaughter of the current Kunagisa Head, a direct descendent, and as such, any slight towards her was unforgivable. For Professor Kyouichirou, turning down her demands was unthinkable.

If I had to say, the current situation we were in only came about because Kunagisa had used that authority as a shield to muscle her way in. Thinking about it that way, the professor's disdain and Shito's irritableness were more than understandable. We were the ones being unreasonable.

"…………"

That was only in regards to the current situation however.

"By the way, just who is that young man?"

In an instant, the professor turned his attention to me. Without even hiding his suspicion, he glared at me before jabbing a finger in my direction.

"I was certain you would have brought your brother with you, Lady Kunagisa. I thought it impossible for your *agent* to be anyone else. It's astounding to think that there could be someone bizarre enough to measure up. Hmm? I don't recognize his face. Is he some famous heir? Or could he be an Engineer, the same as you? He definitely doesn't seem the type, but is he a member of *Cluster,* perhaps?"

"No, Iichan's a friend." Kunagisa said nonchalantly. "Nao-kun's the world's third-most busybody you know, so he doesn't have the time to come traipsing out to a place like this. He did send his regards though. *My sister may do something careless, but allow me to take full responsibility; I humbly request your forgiveness.*"

"That's- That's… Ha-ha-ha-" For the first time since we arrived, the professor appeared to find something genuinely funny, and he roared with laughter. "It seems he's doing rather well for himself. He hasn't changed at all to come up with something like that…. Ha-ha. It's been a while since I've heard something so good-natured. It's been quite some time, Lady Kunagisa."

This old man seemed to be enjoying himself like a child might, but in an instant, "now then," his demeanor changed completely.

"Let's have a serious talk. I'm sure we're both nearing our limits, aren't we? Well—" once again, the professor's gaze fell on me. The pressure that accompanied it made me recoil inside, but I tried not to let it show on my face. I think I probably pulled it off. However, my small victory was of little importance to the professor, and like that, he continued.

"Why don't we have your **friends** take their leave? This is an important discussion, after all."

"…Are you referring to me?"

"Was that not clear, son?" Heh, a chuckle escaped his lips. "You've got good eyes, son. Real good. On par with our Shito here. Truly wonderful eyes."

For a moment upon hearing that, Shito, who was still standing behind the professor, looked taken aback. He seemed to glower at me, but that too was only for a moment before he quickly regained his composure and turned away.

"Still, this is a somewhat technical conversation. I don't think it's an especially unreasonable request. So, will you give up your seat?"

"That's…but-"

"The professor's right, Inoji."

Suzunashi placed a hand on my shoulder from behind. When I turned to face her, I found that she was not looking at me; instead, her sharp gaze was focused squarely on the professor. She was grinning as if she found the whole situation rather enjoyable, however I knew that when it came to Suzunashi, this kind of expression was a fabrication, a poker face. When she was truly having fun, Suzunashi did not smile.

"You're a minor, an outsider, and moreover you're a layman— you

shouldn't be sticking your neck into adults' business, especially when you don't understand what's going on. Isn't that right, doctor?"

"…Certainly, but," the professor eyed Suzunashi warily, "who are you?"

"My name is Suzunashi Neon. Meaning *a bell-less chime that rings twice*. I'm these two's chaperone."

As she said this, she placed a hand on Kunagisa's back and, half-by-force, made her sit before taking the seat next to her. No, *taking a seat* was far too polite an expression for it. It was as if she were claiming it. I had half a mind to call it conquest; it was a truly bold move.

She flashed a daring smile at the professor.

"Of course, as their chaperone, I will be sitting in. That won't be a problem, right professor?" The corners of her lips curled upwards, making her expression appear all the more wicked. "Of course it wouldn't. There's not a thing for you to fret over. No, no, In fact, this can only be a good thing. After all, Kunagisa's every bit as much a minor as Inoji. There's no way an upstanding gentleman such as yourself would let a minor negotiate without anyone there to advocate for her, so it's only natural that I would sit in. Needless to say, any distinguished scholar, any honourable professor, and above all else, any friend of Kunagisa Tomo would have already come to this conclusion ages ago, so of course you would have me join you."

"………"

That's *Violence Neon*, for you. No one could hold a candle to her when it came to playing the villain. Her stature was perfectly suited for playing the world's most convincing heel. For someone as unimposing as myself, it was unimaginable.

In response— the professor laughed in delight.

"Ha-ha-ha… Indeed, Miss Suzunashi." The professor nodded profusely. "It's exactly as you say. You're completely right. Spot-on. Alright,

I don't mind, so why don't you join us? You can stay as long as you like. However, that young man over there is going to have to find a way to kill an hour or two on his own."

"Sure. That'll be okay, won't it?" Suzunashi turned to me and winked. "That's just fine, isn't it, Inoji?"

"Got it. I'll do that, then. It looks like I don't have much choice anyways." I raised my hands to show I understood. Then, turning to Kunagisa, "Tomo, I guess I'll be in the smoking room."

"Yup," Kunagisa beamed me an innocent smile. "Gotcha, Iichan. Wait for me. I'll be out in a sec, so don't get lost."

That smile, those words, they came as a great relief to me.

Yes, this was the Kunagisa Tomo I knew.

"Alright. Well then, Shito, let's wait outside together."

"Understood. In that case, I'll show you around and— wait, what!?" Shito shouted. "Don't just act so chummy with me all of a sudden."

"Just joking," I said. And so, leaving the rest to Suzunashi, I stepped out of the parlour.

2

Time for some Philosophy.

Now then, what is this thing we call the soul in the first place? I believe it was Freud who claimed the soul was composed of the conscious and the subconscious, but was that really something that warranted distinction? Say I lacked a subconscious, or even a conscious, leaving me as nothing more than a collection of subconscious thoughts, would that really cause any problems for someone like me?

Kunagisa had said that the heart was the result of physical processes in the brain. And she's probably correct. I'm not doubtful enough of modern physiology to deny it outright. Still, if the heart and mind are a monolith, nothing more than electrical impulses in the neurons and synapses, then I would have a hard time finding fault with those who believe we are no different from machines; in fact my own feelings on the matter are quite similar. But even then, would that really change anything? I can't help thinking, *even If I realize people are the same as machines, would that really be so bad?*

If you could explain away all human action or human behaviour with perfect logic and orderly programs, or suppose you could manufacture a perfect imitation of the human soul, what would be so wrong with that? When did the word *wrong* even come into the equation? There's no rule stating that all chess players must be human. Even if the Tower of Hanoi is routinely solved by the work of a machine, where's the harm in that? Being able to recreate a lump of organic matter with a collection of the inorganic is something to be praised, not shamed. There are those who are likely to view this as blasphemy or sacrilege, but there is no reason to believe that the creation of life is the domain of gods alone. After all, how much difference is there between remodeling a boar into a pig, and a man-made facsimile of life?

From an ethical viewpoint, the invention of the automobile would have been a similar affront.

At the very least, it has long been common knowledge that recreating the human soul using modern programs and technology is a theoretical possibility. No, I ought to say it was already very close to being a reality. Artificial life nearly indistinguishable from humanity, archaically termed androids, were only a matter of time. Costs aside, there was precious little that could not be accomplished by science in this day and age.

That's just how it is, I think.

For example, even these worthless thoughts of mine could be said to be nothing more than ones and zeroes swimming around in my brain. And given enough time, it would be possible to express that machine language as script. I'm not here to say whether this is good or bad, trivial or pointless, or anything of the sort.

Instead it's like this. Even though all my thoughts can ultimately be expressed in prose, how is it that I'm still lost? I thought words were supposed to be simple. Even if, in some distant place, god were looking down on me from their castle on high, they would come to know my thoughts for exactly what they are, nothing more than meaningless nonsense. This isn't some romantic conjecture, or fantastic illusion, but cold hard fact. Still, for some reason, I aimlessly, idly, and precariously amble on. In other words, rather than some manufacturing error on the part of god, could it be that my systems were simply incompatible? Perhaps some unintended syntax had been carved into my brain; a failure from the very start.

If that were true.

Why on earth would you copy a program like that? What meaning was there to such run-of-the-mill software that mass produces such shoddy code? To design an application only capable of misunderstanding, only capable of error, to replicate a device that, even given thousands of years, would be incapable of learning or growing, what would you have to be thinking?

If such a thing did exist, would it be like viewing myself in the mirror? To peer through the looking glass, to glimpse beyond the water's surface was likely a pointless endeavour. There was really no need for me to look; after all, what lay beyond was—was-

"Umm, it was…what was it again?"

I thought about it for a while, but the words never came to me. I tried giving it another minute, but still no luck. That was probably all this nonsense user could manage for one day. Good grief, I abandoned my train-of-thought, and, leaning against the back of the sofa, I gazed up at the ceiling.

"Hmm… Forcing yourself to think about things seriously sure is tough."

I had gone to the trouble of coming all the way here, so figured I'd try considering stuff like that (A.I. and artificial life, that is), but as I had thought, nothing had come of it. It seemed like I would never come up with anything substantial carrying on like this. I had just learned a valuable lesson: if you don't come up with your conclusions first, you'll have a tough time tying everything together. The inductive method wasn't so simple after all.

The smoking room.

It had already been thirty minutes since I was driven out of the parlour. Meanwhile, Kunagisa, Suzunashi, and of course, Professor Kyouichirou, Shito, and Misachi had yet to show any signs of wrapping up. At this rate, it seemed like they might take a little while longer.

"Thrown out in the cold, huh…?"

I muttered.

Well, that's just how it is. I didn't think anything of it. After all, I didn't especially want to gather around their fire in the first place. I was used to being an outsider, and objectively speaking, leaving it in Kunagisa and Suzunashi's hands was likely the safest course of action. At the very least, it was clearly better than having a dangerous guy like me around.

I knew that.

I understood.

In front of the sofa was a table, and on it, an ashtray. A single cigarette remained, the one that Suzunashi had put out earlier. It seemed like a brand that contained a lot of tar. I didn't know any women besides Suzunashi who would smoke something like this. Still, Suzunashi was someone with strong lungs, so it wasn't something I needed to worry about, I suppose. At the very least, she wasn't the type to die of lung cancer.

"…Come to think of it, Suzunashi can't hold her liquor…"

Someone who smokes, but can't drink is pretty rare, but giving it some thought, the two likely had nothing to do with each other. On one hand we had the lungs, and on the other we had the liver; they belonged to entirely different systems. It's not something that can be compared one-to-one. That being said, Suzunashi's best friend Miiko can drink like a fish, but can't stand cigarette smoke, so I felt like there must have been some kind of association there, some kind of causal relationship that resulted in such polar opposites. No, somewhere or other, my logic had gone way off the rails.

"Man, I'm bored… maybe I'll practice my Miyamoto Musashi impression while doing the robot…"

As I was monologuing about things that even I didn't understand, suddenly, I heard what sounded like a running motor. As it steadily drew closer, the sound gradually grew louder. It almost sounded like the match cars or RC cars I used to play with, it was that kind of cheap sounding engine. But still, what on earth—

As I was standing up to search for the source of the sound, colliding with my right leg, the source of the sound found me. It was a lump of steel roughly one quarter my height. To be more specific, it was a cylindrical steel object with wheels at its base and accompanied by what looked like a mop. Still half-sitting, I felt it repeatedly bumping into my right calf.

“———?”

What is this thing?

As I scoured the cabinets of my mind for a proper noun to accompany such a curious object, I came up empty. **Ween ween**, it cried out just like a sound effect from a comic book. Looking at its parts, it was obvious that it was some kind of machine, but for the life of me, I couldn’t wrap my head around its purpose.

I tried holding it down. As I did, the strange machine came to a dead stop. I turned it around and let it go, and when I released it, the machine took off in the other direction, its engine humming all the way.

“…? …What was that…?”

“A cleaning robot.”

As I quizzically watched the departure of Mysterious Object X, a human voice came from the other direction. I turned around, and about five meters down the hall stood two people wearing the same kind of lab coats as Shito and the professor. One had inordinately long hair to the point where it reached their lower-back. What’s more, it didn’t look well taken care of; like some youkai straight out of a book, it was matted and long like he had never heard of a hairdresser or even basic grooming for that matter. His dreadful hair-style obscured most of his face, but based on the thick goatee visible through the gaps, I could tell he was a man.

In contrast, the other man’s hair was neat and tidy. However, his hair was just about the only part of him that appeared cared for, as he was considerably overweight. His lab coat looked exceptionally snug on him, and I would be pressed to say that his physique looked in any way fit or healthy. That said, it’s not as if he was unsightly; he kept a strange kind of tidiness about him. He gave the impression of some kind of nobleman from a black-and-white foreign film.

It wasn’t Suzunashi and Miiko, but once again, I was faced with polar

opposites, I thought. I made my way towards them. “Sorry, what was that?” I said. “Umm, were you saying something?”

“No, no, no, nothing important.” The fat man waved his arm about in an exaggerated manner. “You just seemed perplexed. I thought I’d do you a kindness and explain it for you. That’s a cleaning robot. In other words, a personal maid-bot, ha-ha. No, no, I suppose I shouldn’t laugh about it. It’s a pet project Ougaki cobbled together after all.”

Ougaki made that? That’s pretty impressive, I thought. I turned around once more and peered down the hall, but Mysterious Object X was already nowhere to be seen. It must’ve already turned the corner.

“It uses its radar and sensors to detect trash and dirt and clean it up all on its own apparently… You see, this facility here’s barely scraping by because a certain someone doesn’t think twice before spending.” The fat man shot a sarcastic glance at the long-haired man. “We don’t have enough left to hire a janitor, so Ougaki took it upon himself to build that. Yup, he sure is reliable… what a commendable lad, especially nowadays. It’s just- That robot, its one hitch is that it can’t tell the difference between people and garbage.”

“Isn’t that a huge problem?”

That must’ve been the reason it was bumping into me earlier. Because I was on the same level as garbage.

“There’s no need for it to distinguish between people and trash,” The long-haired man muttered, his voice soft, quiet, and dark. “There’s no need to tell them apart because they’re one-in-the-same.”

If he had been using the same sarcastic tone as the fat man, I would have known how to handle it, but since he seemed deadly serious, as the addressee, I was completely stumped. “You betcha, that’s what I’m always saying,” nodding along like that would be the same as admitting I was filth.

“Ha-hahaha, this guy really does say some nasty things,” the fat man

laughed boisterously at the long-haired man's expense. "Look what you've done. You've gone and freaked him out. We'll all be in trouble if you spoil his mood, you know?"

Then the fat man turned to me.

"After all, this here's the sweetheart of the famous Kunagisa Head's granddaughter, he could have us all snuffed out. He's her lover, her main squeeze. This young gentleman could crush us worthless researchers with just his fingertip."

"…Umm."

"Oh, my-my, how rude of me. I forgot my introduction." The fat man grinned to himself, then seemingly half-in-jest, he placed his opposite hand over his heart and gave a deep bow. "I have been humbly permitted to perform my research here and ever so graciously entrusted with the Fifth Research Ward, Neo Furuara, at your service."

"...uh-huh."

I nodded uncertainly. If this man, this fat man, was Neo, then the long-haired one must be- I turned to look at him. The long-haired man seemed to notice my gaze. His hair covered his face so I couldn't see his eyes, but it seemed that he could still see mine.

"Koutari Hinayoshi,"

He spoke curtly.

"Nice to meet you, Loverboy."

"Uh-huh…" Once again I nodded uncertainly.

Koutari was a fairly commonplace name in Kyoto, but to the rest of the country it was the kind of name that was *famous for how rare it was*. I wondered if that meant it was safe to assume that Koutari's from Kyoto.

"Hello, it's nice to meet you, I suppose."

The pair were so different, each with their own bizarre impact, that it was impossible for me to determine just how tense I was supposed to be feeling. If I were to try and get on with Neo, then I would need to be on top of my game, but that meant that it would be hard to match Koutari's energy. I was caught in a tug-of-war between an extrovert and introvert. However, I didn't feel particularly troubled over it. There was no need to force myself to deal with them in the first place. I responded with a simple "then if that's all" and turned back towards the smoking room.

"Oi, oi, oi, don't be like that. If you say something so cold, I'll start to feel lonely," the fat man called out… Come to think of it, that was probably a rude thing to call him. Neo followed after me, and without asking, plopped himself in the seat in front of me. "You've got time to kill, right? Then let's have a chat, Mr. Bigshot."

"…I don't have that much time though."

"Anyone who sits around muttering to themselves about strange things like the brain, A.I., and the human soul, can't be all that busy," speaking softly, Koutari took his place on the sofa beside Neo. "Moreover, anyone who does a Miyamoto Musashi impression while doing the robot clearly has nothing but time."

"……………"

Huh. They had heard my painful monologue. It appeared that they had been watching me for quite some time. I have an awful habit of not paying attention to my surroundings whenever I get lost in thought. Even then, since I was deep in enemy territory (—it was probably safe to call it that), such carelessness was more than just stupid. The only person who could probably get away with being careless at a time like this was the Red Contractor. I ought to do some serious reflecting later.

But first, *Mr. Bigshot?* I suppose it was somewhat expected, but just as we had borrowed *Chee-kun*'s power to look into these guys, it seems they had conducted their own investigation as well. That means that earlier when the professor seemed not to know who Suzunashi and I were, or when he told

us that he was expecting Nao instead, he had been bluffing the entire time.

If that were true, then does that mean not telling Shito about Suzunashi and I was a deliberate ploy to get us to buy into the act? It's said that in order to deceive your enemy, first deceive your friends. Hmm, I see, that's *The Mad Demon,* for you. He was even craftier than I gave him credit for. My eyes flitted towards the parlour; I felt just the tiniest amount of admiration for the old man. Deceiving your friends— it's harder than it seems.

"—Well then? Did you two have something you wanted to discuss with me?"

"Goodness. Being asked so directly sure puts us on the spot, isn't that right, Koutari?"

"…………"

Koutari responded with complete silence.

"Oh my, he's giving me the cold shoulder too. How lonely I am." However, he looked nothing of the sort. A generous smile was plaster on his face. He turned to face me once more. "Alright, alright, I suppose I do. I'll talk and all you have to do is listen."

"What's this about?"

"So you want to know, huh?" His large cheeks trembled when he smirked. "Anything you want. It could be about anything you want."

"…………"

"Hm? What's this? Are you wary of me, perhaps? It couldn't be."

"Not at all," I responded calmly. "Why would I be? I simply make a point of not putting any trust in men who talk too much. Those who smile with their face but sneer with their heart always feel like they're up to something. I'm not fond of schemers."

“How harsh, truly.” Neo put his face in his palm. His every action was exaggerated. It was as if he were putting on a show. “Still, putting trust aside, surely there are things that you want to know, right? About Utsurigi, perhaps?”

“………………”

“Hm? What’s the matter? You want to know, don’t you? All about Utsurigi Gaisuke?”

Utsurigi Gaisuke.

I hadn’t meant to react, but when I heard that name, my shoulders flinched a little. That seemed like confirmation enough for Neo, and with that, “alright, gotcha,” he flamboyantly clapped his hands together.

“That’s right. You came to see Utsurigi after all. It’s only natural that you’d want to hear all about him. Of course, nothing could be more natural. Now then, Utsurigi, that man has extraordinary talent. No, he doesn’t have talent so much as he is a man of talent. That man is…”

“A pervert.”

Koutari hijacked Neo’s conclusion. Just looking at him- no, even doing so, his face was obscured by hair, so I couldn’t catch even the slightest glimpse of his expression- but I could still tell. In much the same manner as before, that is to say, without any hint of accusation or derision, he spoke as if he was merely stating the facts.

“That man is a pervert. Make no mistake.”

“…… Is that so?”

I could only nod along.

Now that I think of it, Shito had said the exact same thing. Still, referring to a co-worker who works in the same facility as you as a *pervert* hardly seemed appropriate. Admittedly, this facility, run by a self-proclaimed

Mad Demon, was already well beyond the jurisdiction of everyday sensibilities. But that's exactly why Utsurigi '*Malignant Green'* Gaisuke earning such reproach in a place like this made me wonder. What on earth was he?

It was getting harder and harder to picture.

"Pervert's a little cruel don't you think, Koutari? That's taking it too far, no matter how you look at it. There's a proper way to say such things, after all." Neo patted the unresponsive Koutari's shoulder. "Granted, he's certainly a little odd. In any case, he hasn't taken **a single step** out of the Seventh Ward since he got here. You've gotta hand it to him. Well, I guess it's probably not because he's a research-nut like the professor though—"

"He doesn't leave?"

That's obviously because you've got him locked up, I thought of adding, but I held my tongue. It would be meaningless to argue with Neo now, in a place like this. Not that I thought I could win an argument with him in the first place. Put plainly, this kind of loquaciously theatrical type was my Achilles heel. I might have even been better off trying to argue against a certain *Dark Knife*.

"Ah, yes! Speaking of Utsurigi, here's a funny story." Neo rather deliberately brought his hands together as if he had just remembered something. "It happened about half-a-year ago. You see, there was this two-headed boar—"

"What the hell are you going on about, Neo?"

Once again, Neo was cut off mid-sentence. However, this time the culprit was not Koutari. When we looked toward the source of the voice, there stood Shito looking down on the three of us with a stern expression. Behind him, I could see Suzunashi. In that case, despite not being able to see her because of her small stature, I was certain Kunagisa had followed behind as well.

"Yo, Shito."

Grinning, Neo performatively raised a hand in salute.

"You've fulfilled your duties admirably"

"And you haven't fulfilled your duties at all, Neo," Shito spoke somewhat pointedly. "What were you talking about? What were you about to tell this guy?"

This guy, he called me.

"Not much. I haven't said much of anything. I'm the silent type after all. It was just a greeting, that's about it. Right, Koutari? Isn't that right?"

"Don't ask me."

Koutari's words came out blunt and frigid, then he stood. He passed by Shito and headed off down the hall, likely towards the parlour where the professor was.

"Oi, oi. Seriously, I just can't with this guy. What am I supposed to do now? Jeez, hang on a second." Neo raised his large body off the sofa as if to follow Koutari. "Man… he's awfully impatient. Ah, well then, boy, that's all for now. I often stroll around the facility, so we'll likely run into each other again. Let's have another chat then. Next time, let's really take our time."

Next, ignoring Shito, he bowed to Suzunashi and Kunagisa.

"My-my, it's a pleasure to make the acquaintance of such beautiful young women. Please enjoy the research facility of *The Mad Demon,* Shadou Kyouichirou, at your leisure."

He bowed so deeply that his head might have touched the floor. Then, righting himself, "haha-," he laughed boldly before turning to face me once more. "I'll see you around," he said before heading off after Koutari.

"……Inoji. What was that about?" Suzunashi was flabbergasted. "It's been a long time since anyone's called me a beautiful young woman."

“Me too.” Kunagisa looked astonished, as she watched Neo disappear down the hall. “Who the heck was that, Iichan?”

“Neo Furuara… and the guy who looked like he was made of hair was Koutari. Koutari Hinayoshi.”

Still, *see you around*, huh? He spoke as if that was a given. He did seem like the kind of guy you’d bump into often, but I couldn’t help feeling like he had been setting unnecessary flags.

“Hmph,” Shito heaved a sigh, looking annoyed. “Man, what a thoughtless bunch… To think that they’d strike up a conversation with this guy. For a researcher from our facility, what a pointless thing to do.”

What’s this? Was I being bad-mouthed?

Shito continued muttering to himself for all to hear. I ignored him and addressed Suzunashi standing behind him instead. “Tell me everything. How did it go?” Hmm, some of Neo’s gregariousness must have rubbed off on me. The same must’ve happened to Suzunashi because she flung her arms open wide enough to embrace me. “Positively!” came her exaggerated response.

“Though I suppose we should see how it turns out first. For now, we’ve been given express permission to meet with Utsurigi Gaisuke.”

“That’s right, Iichan.” Kunagisa’s blue hair swayed as she spoke. “Shito-chan’s gonna lead us there right away.”

“Don’t call me Shito-chan!” Shito stopped muttering and finally turned to face us. “You’re all acting mighty familiar! I don’t care if you know the professor or whatever, but don’t act like we’re friends!”

“But if you think about it, it’s gotta be Shito-chan, right?” I gave a dignified nod. “After all, it’s every nineteen-year-old's duty to call sixteen-year-olds -chan.”

“Like hell it is! Are you fucking with me? You’re fucking with me, aren’t you!? Huh!?” Shito was yelling. “Cut it out! Or is this some roundabout

way of making an ass out of me!?"

"It wasn't my intention to be roundabout, but still, them's the rules… I understand how you feel Shito-chan, I do, but it's out of my hands."

"If you hate it that much, Shito-chan, I can call you Shitoppi-chan instead."

"Don't you dare! The next time you guys make fun of me, I'm gonna get mad for real!"

"Understood, Shito-chan."

"Roger that, Shito-chan."

As those words left our mouths, Kunagisa and I were decked by Suzunashi.

3

I noticed something unexpected as we were leaving the research ward—namely, that the key-card, password, voice-recognition and retinal-scan were all necessary in order to leave the building. To have to go through such a strict process, not only upon entry, but upon exit too, was, as I've said over and over again by this point, very much like a prison. When we entered, Shito told me *not to leave on my own* or something to that effect, but it seemed like that had been impossible to begin with.

"The Seventh Ward is this way." With his usual curtness, Shito led the way. "God— why'd I have to get saddled with these guys…? This wasn't part of the job description."

Following a little ways behind him was Kunagisa Tomo and myself. Suzunashi had said, "I want to check out this building a little more. Y'know, detective work," so she was still poking around the Primary Ward. Suzunashi was an awfully inquisitive woman, so she must've seen this as a good opportunity to take a look at something. She got Misachi to show her around. Misachi was a beautiful girl in her own right, but she wasn't youthful enough that it should cause a problem.

"By the way, Tomo," I turned to her, as we walked beside each other, "just what kind of things did you and Professor Kyouichirou talk about? He granted you an audience with Utsurigi pretty quickly, don't you think? I'm not sure if this is just my negativity or pessimism talking, but I was sure he'd put up more of a fight."

"Yeah, you're right. If you ask me, everything's going off without a hitch, but to have everything play out exactly as planned like this is a little spooky." She rubbed the back of her head where she'd been hit by Suzunashi as she answered. "I guess he's feeling pretty confident."

"Confident?"

"Yup. He's confident about Sacchan. Honestly, that man… the professor's really taking this seriously. A lot's happened, so I guess you could say it's to be expected. That's just his nature as a researcher— no, as a scholar. I guess you could call it his lot in life."

Kunagisa looked a little disappointed, as if she was reluctant to let go of something important. I had no idea what to say to Kunagisa when she was like this, so I turned away awkwardly, and, "by the way," I changed the subject.

"How do they get electricity this deep in the mountains? Do they have proper power lines? What about gas and water, or even phone lines, for that matter?"

"Not sure. Hey, how do they do it, Shito-chan?"

Kunagisa called out to him. Shito seemed to have given up on the nickname, and while he didn't look pleased, he said nothing. "Hah," he just laughed as if it was all beneath him.

"That would be **this right here**." He gestured to the building next to us. "As much as eighty percent is generated in-house. Our research and experiments use up quite a bit of electricity, so even with a power line, we have to supplement the rest ourselves."

"Hmm. Then this building is—?"

"The Sixth Ward."

"So the Sixth Ward's a power generator, huh? Since it's not used for any research I was wondering what it was for. I see—" I looked up at it. At a glance, it appeared the same as the Primary Ward and all the other buildings we'd seen— windowless— but still- "Don't tell me you've got a nuclear reactor packed in there."

"Don't be stupid, we'd never build anything that dangerous." My

concern was immediately shot down. “It’s a hydrogen generator, just hydrogen.”

“What’s a hydrogen generator?”

“A generator that uses hydrogen. Can’t you tell by the name?”

It was a completely worthless explanation, but Shito didn’t seem keen on elaborating, having already turned back around. We walked at a leisurely pace along a path that ran between the woods and the so-called *Hydrogen Generator*. The Seventh Ward, where Utsurigi resided, was apparently just beyond the Sixth Ward. Since the Seventh Ward was the highest number, I wondered if that meant it was built last.

“Still, these buildings are awfully close together…” I thought back to the research ward directory, as I muttered to no one in particular. “Wouldn’t that cause problems if there was ever a fire or earthquake?”

“Mmm…” Kunagisa took a long look at the Primary Ward and then the Sixth Ward before nodding. “Yup. I think it all comes down to land development though. We’re talking about a mountainside here, so there’s all kindsa regulations you need to follow. This is all second-hand info from Nao-kun though. Still, it’s miles better than Tokyo, right?”

“Well, I guess so. Wait, hang on. You’ve never been to Tokyo, so how would you know?”

“You haven’t either.”

“But I’ve been to Houston.”

“That’s not something to brag about.”

It was not.

For some reason or other, I found myself looking up at the sky. The clouds looked even more dreadful than before. It wasn’t even evening yet, but not a single ray of light pierced through the clouds, rather, it was already as

pitch as night. As if some grim metaphor, the raven-black clouds blanketed the heavens.

—then.

Bump, Kunagisa ran into my back.

“Ah, sorry, Iichan.”

“No, it’s fine.” I stepped aside to let her pass. “I was spaced out too. I was looking at the sky.”

“Hm? Ah, right. The weather stinks, doesn’t it? Looks like rain. Hey, Shito-chan?”

“…What is it?" Even though it was a question, Shito’s inflection remained flat. “Could it be that you’re talking to me?”

“Yup, how high up are we? We’re not above the clouds quite yet.”

“Don’t ask me.” *Hah*, Shito appended his complaint with something resembling a sigh. Not that I could speak for him, but despite being so young, Shito sighed in a way that implied years of hardship. “How the hell would I know?”

“Even though you live here?”

“Then do you know the exact elevation of where you live?”

Hmph, Kunagisa folded her arms. Shito sighed once more before trudging onwards. Yup, it seems like Shito had finally understood just how incorrigible Kunagisa could be. Digging your heels in regarding her would only tire you out.

“What’s up, Iichan? Let’s hurry.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Nodding, I subtly glanced behind us as I followed after her. I didn’t

see anyone, just trees and nothing more.

"…………..."

Naturally, I hadn't bumped into Kunagisa because I was gazing at the sky. I wasn't refined enough a person to get lost in thought staring at some rain clouds. Even faced with sunless sky, I would only ever think, *it sure is overcast*, and that's about it. Right, what made me stop was this: I had sensed something strange behind us. If *something strange* is a little too vague, let me state it definitively.

I had felt someone's gaze.

I'm not sure whether or not it was truly there, but regardless, I got the impression that *someone was watching, someone was staring*. Of course, it should be clear by how I hadn't noticed Neo and Koutari's approach in the Primary Ward earlier, but I'm not especially sensitive to these things. I'm not. Still, that doesn't mean that I'm oblivious to them either. I'm at least perceptive enough to know when I felt it for real.

Still, who on earth was it? At first I thought it might be Professor Kyouichirou or one of his researchers (Neo or Koutari, for example). Either that or his secretary, Misachi, but that couldn't be it. Shito was already doing a commendable enough job watching over us on his own. There'd be no point in going out of their way to send another.

"…Tomo, you haven't done anything bad lately, have you?"

"Nope, nothing lately." Kunagisa answered warily. "Why? What kind of question is that? If I did something naughty, is Iichan gonna punish me? How exciting."

"No, if you didn't, then it's fine."

Fair enough. Kunagisa had done nothing but hole up in her Shirosaki apartment, pouring herself into whatever strange project she was working on at the time, but it couldn't have been anything to warrant this. Even if this did have something to do with whatever this *strange project* was, I couldn't

imagine anyone willing to chase Kunagisa into the heart of the mountains like this. Maybe it was an animal or something; I tried to steer my thoughts towards something more realistic. It seemed too convenient an explanation, but it was likely the only rational answer. Then again, this place was completely surrounded by those high walls, so if it was an animal it would have to be some kind of bird. If that was the case, then I had suddenly become perceptive enough to clock a bird's gaze. That would be a remarkable skill-up, but I had a feeling that was well beyond ordinary human limitations.

"What bargain-bin nonsense…"

I was perfectly fine with the Scarlet Contractor being the only one capable of such a *skill*.

Following Shito's lead, we continued past the Sixth Ward, and when we turned the corner, the Seventh Ward came into sight. As expected, it was a windowless dice-like building just like all the rest. It seemed a tad smaller than the power plant that was the Sixth Ward although from where I was standing, the height seemed about the same.

"……Hmmm—"

So he's in there— *Team*'s very own *Cracker*, Utsurigi *'Malignant Green'* Gaisuke.

Kunagisa took my hand for some reason. When I turned to look at her it seemed that, just like me, Kunagisa was deep in thought staring up at the research ward. I didn't know why she grabbed my hand, but I took a moment and squeezed it back.

"What are you two daydreaming about?" Shito gave us a puzzled look. "Jeez. You want to meet Utsurigi don't you? Then hurry up."

Shito had already reached the entrance. He stood, irritated, in front of the card-reader with his hands on his hips; the tapping of his foot could be heard clearly. Still holding Kunagisa's hand, I approached him.

"Let me say this now… whatever happens next has nothing to do with

me. I couldn't care less. No matter what happens, I won't be coming to save you."

"Save us? What are you talking about?" I cocked my head. "I'm not sure I understand what you're getting at, Shito-chan."

"Can you two just cut that out already…? Just wait 'till I tell your friend in black." Shito shot me a hopeless glance. "Jeez… Why do I always get stuck doing jobs like this… it's so unfair. Well, whatever. As I was saying, no matter what Utsurigi does, I won't save you. I want to make sure you know that."

"Save us from what?" I asked again "It's not like we're about to meet Hannibal Lecter. Utsurigi Gaisuke's not about to bite our tongues off or anything, right?"

"………………"

I had meant it as a joke, but Shito muttered, "excellent deduction, Columbo," before running the key card through the card-reader. He punched in the password, and finally, "Ougaki Shito, ID:ikwe9f2ma444."

The massive door slowly opened. Shito was first to enter, followed by Kunagisa and myself. "God…this wasn't supposed to happen…ugh," Shito muttered as he led us down the hallway.

"Fourth floor,"

Shito said curtly as he unlocked the metal door at the end of the hall. On the other side was a staircase which we began climbing.

"We're not taking the elevator? I saw one right over there."

"Utsurigi hates them. Elevators, that is," Shito answered without turning around. "He disassembled everything from the elevator shaft to the box itself. He **took it out** almost completely by-hand."

"………………"

I peered over at Kunagisa. “Classic Sacchan,” she muttered to herself nostalgically. It didn’t seem like some kind of quip or joke. I get it now, even his *destruction* was *perverted*. I felt as though I’d somehow gotten a glimpse into Utsurigi Gaisuke’s true nature.

We arrived on the fourth floor. After we were done climbing, there was another door to unlock before we stepped out into a white hallway. If the central ward of Kyouichirou’s facility, the Primary Ward, was the very picture of a hospital, then this place gave me the impression of a university hall. That is to say, it seemed almost inhuman. It was surreal. I felt uneasy as if I had found myself in some kind of theme park.

Without skipping a beat, Shito singled out one of the doors that ran up and down the hallway and came to a stop in front of it. He waited for us to catch up, and then, steeling himself, he knocked on the door.

“…………”

No response. Shito knit his brows in suspicion and knocked again. Once again, there was no answer. The air was as still as ever.

“……Strange. The professor should have given him a heads up that we were coming.”

“Could he be asleep?”

“Idiot. Why would he go back to sleep after getting a message saying we’re on our way?” Shito looked at me, exasperated, then he knocked once more. “…………Strange……”

He knocked a fourth time, then a fifth, then giving up, “hah,” Shito let out a small sigh and placed his hand on the knob. “It’s Ougaki. We’re coming in.” After a moment’s hesitation, he pulled open the door.

There was no one inside the room.

Shito entered. We followed suit. I was a little shocked by the state of the room. It wasn’t just that there was no one inside, aside from a simple steel

chair in the middle of the room, there was nothing; without hyperbole or metaphor, honestly and truly, there was not a single solitary thing. As if it was a newly built apartment that had yet to have a single person step foot inside, it was hollow— Yes, an inhuman space.

“Shito,” I called out to him, “which room is this?”

“Huh? This is Utsurigi’s Private Room. Apparently, when he’s not working, he spends most of his time in here, but…”

Private room? What about this room was in any way *private*? If such a thing did exist, you wouldn’t find it here. On a whim, for no reason in particular, I began pacing around the needlessly large room and found that it was roughly 20 square meters.

“Hmmm. So this is Sacchan’s room…?” Kunagisa started doing the same. “Hmm, I see… I see… I see—hehehe.”

She seemed satisfied. I wondered if this was typical of Utsurigi as well. The reality of Utsurigi’s *perversion* was starting to set in. No, if this was just how he was, then it’s probably something more pathological, I thought.

Shito was furious. He aimlessly tore through the room before violently slamming his fist into the wall. Perhaps the walls had some kind of acoustic dampening because all that we heard was a pathetic smack.

“Shit…did he run away…?”

Just as Shito muttered that,

“I didn’t run anywhere.”

A voice came from the doorway. It was oddly pointed and shrill like a hen.

“Don’t go around saying such baseless and hurtful things, Shito. I don’t care if they’re hurtful so long as they’re true, and I can forgive any lies if they’re said with decorum, but I can’t stomach both at the same time. Not at

all, Shito. Or are you suggesting there might be cause for me to run away?"

Shito, Kunagisa, and I all turned around.

A single man in a white lab coat was leaning against the inner frame of the doorway.

What stood out to me first was his grey hair despite his youth. He had an average build with long limbs, so much so that, even though it suited him quite well, the lab coat seemed too short in the sleeves. On his hands, he wore a pair of white, silk gloves. At a glance you could almost call his gentle face feminine, but the poorly kept stubble on the end of his chin struck that thought down. He also wore a pair of orange sunglasses, and lurking just behind them were his eyes. His eyes were smiling, but just beyond them he wasn't smiling at all.

This is. This man is.

"M—M-M-M-" Shito's words got caught in his throat as he stuttered out his name. "…M-Mr. Utsurigi…"

"That's my name," he flashed a handsome smile. "Utsurigi Gaisuke."

"Ah, um…"

Shito seemed to take a step back as he turned towards Utsurigi. Almost like a small animal cowering before a carnivore, his attitude had changed completely. It's hard to imagine that, just a minute ago, Shito was pounding the walls and cursing Utsurigi Gaisuke's name by the way he withered when confronted by him.

Withered.

That's right, this wasn't some display of respect or reverence. What Shito was feeling was unfortunately all too familiar to me. I understood his feelings like they were my own. Enough to make me sick. That's because, just being in his presence, having just met him for the first time, what I was feeling now was likely the same exact feeling that had taken root in Shito.

However, Utsurigi himself seemed to pay Shito and me no mind, as if he hadn't even noticed us. He was fixated on one thing only. There's no need to say what that was. It was none other than the blue-haired girl standing up straight and looking Utsurigi dead in the eyes.

Utsurigi pushed up his sunglasses, and the right corner of his mouth curled.

"—Yo, *Dead Blue."*

He gave an inordinately deep bow.

It was an odd yet memorable sight, a grown man attending on a young girl.

"It's already been two years, has it not? Oh my, did you change your hairstyle? You've grown quite cute. And what happened to your coat? All those wonderful, wonderful memories. Ha ha, regardless, for one such as I to once again bask in your presence like this moves me beyond words."

"To be precise, it's been exactly one year, eight months, thirteen days, fourteen hours, thirty-two minutes and fifteen-point-seven seconds. And of course, seventeen-point-eight-two seconds have already passed since our reunion. Yup, that's right—**I'm** happy to see you too."

His former leader responded.

"Long time no see, *Malignant Green.*"

DAY ONE (3) - BLUE CAGE

0

Hard work is made manifest.

Not that it always manifests as results.

1

“Kunagisa, that little shit…” Shito was addressing me, but it felt more like a monologue than anything else. “…What the hell is she? Just what kind of person are we dealing with?

“Hm?” By the time I realized he was expecting an answer, I’d already missed a beat. “…She’s not little. She’s nineteen, remember?”

“……Right.”

In any normal circumstance, this would be where Shito would offer his rebuttal, but he just nodded weakly.

The smoking room on the Seventh Ward’s fourth floor. Shito and I sat facing one another. Neither of us could really be considered smokers; we were just passing the time. That being said, time was something that tended to go at its own pace, so the expression didn’t quite fit. If anything, we were desperately clinging to the time that was slipping through our fingers. It gave the exact opposite impression, but as a metaphor, it suited the situation nicely.

I peered down the hallway. Setting my eyes on one of the doors that ran along it, I tried to peer through it. Of course, it was quite some distance away, and unlike a certain fortune-teller squirrelled away on an island somewhere, I wasn’t blessed with the powers of clairvoyance, so there was no way for me to know what was happening on the other side. All I knew was that *Dead Blue* and *Malignant Green* were engaged in some kind of

conversation.

What that conversation might be about was beyond me.

I hadn't the foggiest.

"…Utsurigi Gaisuke, huh…?"

I muttered, soft yet heavy.

He looked to be around thirty. I couldn't tell whether his hair was grey because he dyed it, or if that was just its natural colour, but regardless, he was probably around that age. He seemed the capricious and reckless type, but that impression alone was enough to tell me he was far from ordinary. Somewhere lies a thick indelible line, and one glance was enough to tell me he was from the far side of that divide.

Just like the Red Contractor. Just like the Blue Savant.

"Oi, listen. Listen here, you." Some of Shito's strength had returned. "That Kunagisa girl, what is she? I'm asking you a question, answer."

"…You think I know?"

"You've got to, right? You're her lover, aren't you?" Shito said, leaning closer. "That's the first time I've ever seen someone able to speak to Utsurigi as an equal— to meet him on his level. Nobody here's been able to pull that off…not even the professor. Even if they're both ex-members of *Cluster*…"

"That's not quite right," I offered a correction. "Kunagisa Tomo and Utsurigi Gaisuke weren't both members. In terms of pecking order, Kunagisa outranked him. She was the *Team*'s leader, after all."

"…Seriously?"

"Seriously. Although, I still only half-believe it myself. No, maybe it's closer to a 30-70 split." I shrugged self-deprecatingly. "Good grief, what a load of nonsense, right?"

"Unbelievable." Shito leaned back onto the sofa. "Then… what on earth is she?" he asked for the third time.

"You think I know?" My answer remained the same. "Do you honestly think I have any idea, Shito?"

"Are you saying you don't?"

I didn't answer, but my silence spoke volumes.

Right, I didn't know. This Kunagisa Tomo was unknown to me. The Kunagisa Tomo who could hold her own in a conversation with Utsurigi Gaisuke. The Kunagisa Tomo, adorned with such a cruel and dangerous title —*Dead Blue*. When faced with **that**, I'd have better luck telling you about a complete stranger. That way, at the very least, I could be sure that I was actually talking about a person.

When it came to *Dead Blue*— I couldn't even manage that much.

"………………"

Then who was it that I had come to know?

No, that's wrong. Had I ever really known her at all? If there was any nonsense to be found, then this would have to be it. I'd been under a terrible misconception. Even by her side, how many times had I turned a blind eye? No, was there ever a time, even for a moment, that I can honestly claim that I was by her side in the first place? To be by her side like Utsurigi once had, was I even capable of that?

I understood.

The feelings that I harboured, not just for Utsurigi, but for all members of *Team*, I finally understood what they really were. They weren't jealousy, envy, or even longing— nothing so grand. It was an inferiority so severe, it made me sick– a hopelessness so intense, it made me furious– a disappointment so palpable, it made me miserable.

A powerlessness so complete, it drove me mad.

"Oi, are you okay?"

Shito's voice brought me to my senses. When I looked up, he was staring at me with an uneasy expression. Hm? I shook my head. "I'm fine."

"It's nothing."

"Really? You looked pretty rough."

To have Shito of all people fuss over me like this, I must have been a pretty pathetic sight. It must have been hard to look at. I couldn't quite picture it myself, but there was no doubt that was the case. This feeling, akin to betrayal, was more than enough to warrant it after all.

"Betrayal, huh…? Honestly…aren't I just…the worst?"

I muttered and shook my head once more, then, slapping my cheeks with both hands, I recomposed myself. The pain was a wake-up-call that pulled me out of my funk. Alright. Let's save the distress and rumination for a little while later. For now, for right now, why not just float along whichever way the current takes me? Consciously or not, that was just about the only thing I could do for Kunagisa.

"So Shito— what brings you all the way out here?"

"Huh? What are you on about?" Warily, Shito answered my question with a question. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's fine if you don't want to answer. I only asked to fill the silence anyways. I was just thinking how strange it was to bump into someone so young in a place like this."

"*Someone so young*? Is that supposed to be sarcasm or something?"

Shito was silent for a moment. I wasn't actually expecting an answer, so I didn't say anything more, but eventually Shito opened his mouth and said, "I really like the professor."

“The professor— you mean Professor Shadou Kyouichirou?”

“Isn’t that obvious? I don’t care if he’s a *Mad Demon* or whatever, that man is incredible. I’m not sure what’s going on with you and Kunagisa, but isn’t it the same for you?” Shito dragged me into it. “You’re with her because you like her, aren’t you?”

“Likes and dislikes… isn’t that all awfully childish, Shito?” I slowly shook my head. “It’s not that simple. It’s not like that kind of thing doesn’t matter at all, but it’s definitely not everything. If only everything were that easy to understand.”

“…………………”

“No, maybe it is. Maybe it’s even easier than that. So simple it’s hazy, so obvious it’s baffling— maybe that’s how it is. She just happened to be there for me, and I just happened to be there for her— maybe it’s just a matter of getting the timing right. You know, like a digital watch. You happen to look down and all the numbers line-up or something. I think that’s basically all it is. There’s not any particular reason for it.”

“I don’t really get it.”

“I bet. And while we’re on the topic of not understanding, there’s one more thing I’d like to clear up. I’m not her lover. I’m not sure why, but everyone seems to be under that impression. It’s not true. We’re friends, just friends.”

“Huh? Don’t you two get along a little too well to just be friends? Especially for a man and a woman.”

“You can never get along too well with friends. And besides, friendship is unisex… Listen, I’m not sure how she feels about it, but I’m not a fan of being called lovers. You’d hate it if we called you Professor Kyouichirou’s lover, right?”

Shito folded his arms.

"…Of course I would."

"Of course you would. That's how it is for me. It's not really my style to try and boil everything down to romance." I spread my arms wide. "Besides, if we're talking about lovers, I've already got one."

"Oh yeah? What're they like?"

"She's a high schooler at a super elite all-girls school. She's a first year so I guess that makes her fifteen? Her name's Saijou Tamamo, she's a cutesy tomboy who loves glittery things. I've got it bad for her. We go out for ice cream together all the time, and she always makes me pay. She eats all the ice cream, and I just get the cone. But well, that's love for ya."

"……sounds like a made-up story."

"That's because half of it is."

"God, you're such a liar."

"At least I'm not a mochi-fryer."

"Sure, sure, every year when New Year's rolls around, I spend all day kneading it, and then I get out my hammer and—hang on a second!" Shito yelled. "Why do I have to play the straight-man for you at a time like this!?"

"I mean, I wasn't actually expecting you to play along…"

Teasing Shito was fun.

Shito, on the other hand, didn't seem to be enjoying himself at all. "Cut it out, seriously." His mood soured.

"Listen here— come to think of it, what was your name anyway? No one told me. You were the only one who didn't introduce themselves."

Hm? I tilted my head. From what I'd gathered from my talk with Neo, Professor Kyouichirou had looked into us well before we arrived; I assumed my name had probably come up, but could it be that they hadn't dug deep

enough? Either that or they figured that, as Kunagisa's plus-one, learning my name wasn't important. Ah, no, that's wrong. Whether my name had come up or not, as the lone person in charge of *guiding Kunagisa and her associates*, Shito had been kept in the dark. A moment ago, Shito had been brimming with admiration for the professor; if he knew what role he was playing, I wonder if he could still say the same. A pawn used to deceive the enemy.

"…………………"

He probably could. It was the kind of thing that could be smoothed over by a simple explanation after all.

"Oi, you still there? Do you have a name or what?

"Um, let's see… the name's Spooky E."

"………..huh."

I had gotten my hopes up a little, but this time, Shito didn't take the bait. In fact, he received my joke rather coldly.

"…umm, so like, 'E' as in *Ii*-chan? Is that supposed to be the punchline?"

"Bingo."

"……………"

"But you can call me, Ii-dachi Ii-kuyo."

"……………………………….."

I got the feeling that, in some way or another, Shito had given up on me. He hung his head and with a sigh, "Anyway, someone like you," he got the conversation back on track.

"Someone like you wouldn't understand why I'm here even if I told you. You'd never understand."

“Right. No one likes to be told that they’re feelings are easy to see through after all… That reminds me, this April, I met this fortune-teller who could see everything that lay in a person's heart.”

“What? Another one of your lies, I bet.”

“Not so much a lie as nonsense. There’s a subtle difference. Anyway, there’s not a thing that either of us could hide from her.”

“So she’s a master of psychology or something?”

A rather scientific interpretation. “That’s certainly one way to look at it, I guess.” I nodded.

“So what do you think, Shito? About that sort of thing.”

“What do I think? It’d suck, right?” Shito tilted his head as if he didn’t understand the question. “Having all your thoughts laid bare like that, I certainly wouldn’t call it pleasant. It’s like you said earlier.”

“No, not that… I’m not talking about you. How do you think she must feel, always knowing exactly what people are thinking?”

“Wouldn’t that be convenient? You could use it for all kinds of things.”

“…Convenient, huh? …You may be right.”

Shito’s answer was cut and dry. I nodded, but if the fortune-teller were here, I’m sure she would’ve had some kind of retort.

Ah, speaking of.

Even with that fortune-teller’s ability to read minds— Kunagisa Tomo’s heart was still unclear to her. The reason for that murkiness was likely that Kunagisa’s mind was far too vast. Her mind processed far more information than the average person’s, so I couldn’t imagine making sense of it all was an easy task.

At that moment, the one and only Mysterious Object X— no, I guess it wasn't so mysterious anymore— passed by the smoking room. Without mistaking any people for garbage, the metal cylinder sped off down the hall. I see, so the bot was in charge of cleaning all the wards.

"You're the one who made the maid-bot, right Shito?"

"Huh?" Shito furrowed his brow. "Well yeah, but… Who'd you hear that from?"

"Neo."

"—that bastard." Irritated, Shito clicked his tongue. "He can't keep his mouth shut."

"It's not a good idea to go around calling your seniors bastards. Still, that's pretty impressive. Building a maid-bot is honestly pretty amazing. I prefer the old-fashioned kind myself, but your new type of maids isn't half bad."

"Don't call it a maid-bot. Neo's the only one who says that crap."

Without any sense of pride or boastfulness, instead, like he found all the praise rather annoying, "that's nothing," he said.

"With the right tools and parts, even a grade schooler could put something like that together."

"True enough. That's the difference between it and the older models."

I was nodding along, but man do I prefer old-school maids.

"…Hey Shito. Speaking of maids, I've got another question."

"What is it?"

"I heard Utsurigi never leaves this building, is that true?"

"Putting what that has to do with maids aside… where did you hear

that?” he asked suspiciously.

“Ahh, well. I got that from Neo too.”

“………..” Shito froze for a moment. “………..Shit. That bastard.”

“I thought I told you to cut it out with the *bastard* stuff.”

“The bastard’s a bastard. I can’t help what he is. Besides, I’m the one with seniority. I started my career here well before him. Neo’s our newest researcher after all. ……but yeah, it’s true. And what of it? Is Utsurigi not going outside gonna be a problem for you?”

“No, nothing like that…” I casually dismissed the question. “I was just thinking, this place sure is full of eccentric people. Of course there’s Utsurigi, but it’d be hard to call you particularly normal either, and then there’s also Professor Kyouichirou, Neo, Koutari, and Ms. Kokoromi. You’ve got quite the smattering of academics. Maybe Professor Kyouichirou isn’t the only *Mad Demon* around here after all.”

“I’m normal. Don’t just take off-handed jabs at me like that. …… Hm? Hang on a second, forget Neo and Koutari, you’ve met Miyoshi too?”

“Oh, no, I haven’t. But even I’ve heard the rumours. Enough to know that she’s an authority on human anatomy and a top-of-the-line vivisectionist.”

“Really now? Well, she is fairly famous… Especially given where she worked before coming here. It’s not strange that you might have heard of her. Anyway, I’m perfectly normal. And not just me, everyone here is. From the perspective of someone as mediocre as you, they might seem a little odd, but that’s just a problem with your understanding.”

“Huh… you might be right. That’s probably it.”

I nodded, but I doubted that when Shito said *everyone,* he had Utsurigi in mind as well, but I decided not to pursue the matter. If I did, then naturally Kunagisa would get brought up as well, and if that happened, I had

no confidence I could carry on a level-headed conversation.

“A problem of understanding, huh…?”

Was that really true? Maybe. Maybe not. Although I’m nearly certain that it was. That’s just how these things are. In the end, the problems all lead back to me. For as complicated as things get, the answer is always shockingly *logical*. Almost like Murphy’s Law.

Which dictates that any difficult calculation always comes down to a one or a zero.

“Zero, huh…”

At that moment, *creak*, the scraping of a door hinge. I looked towards the sound and saw Kunagisa stepping out of the room. Closing the door behind her, she began looking all around, but when we made eye-contact she froze stiff.

“Ah, Iichan spotted!”

She called out and charged right for us. I thought she would only go full-speed until she reached the smoking room. However, her pace didn’t appear to be slowing; in fact, she was only getting faster before eventually launching herself at me. I was already used to Kunagisa pulling these kinds of stunts, so, as to not injure either of us, I caught her, skillfully cushioned the blow.

“Hehe-” Kunagisa giggled, and with her arms wrapped around my back, she hugged me. “I’m home, Iichan.”

“………”

I hesitated for a moment, “welcome home, Tomo.”

This familiar, natural feeling.

This was all I needed. This was enough.

Please be enough.

"…Thanks for the show," Shito groaned. "But if you're done with your chat, let's hurry up and leave. You two can make-out somewhere else. I was told to take you back to the professor once you were done with your meeting."

"You're less of an assistant, and more of a gopher, huh, Shito?"

"Shut up! I'll kill you, asshole!"

Irritated (no, he was downright mad), Shito stood up aggressively. Then, barging past us, he walked on ahead. I went to take off after him immediately, but since Kunagisa wouldn't let go, I never even made it off the chair.

"Hey, Tomo. I'll let you hug me as much as you like later, so let go for now, okay?"

"Hmmm. Sounds good, but," surprisingly, she did as she was told and climbed off me. Then, turning to Shito, "Shito-chan, wait a second."

"Hah? Why am I waiting? Are you gonna hug me too?"

"Ew, gross. It's just that, you see, Sacchan…" For a moment Kunagisa shot me a side-eyed glance, but she immediately turned her gaze back to Shito. "He says he wants to talk to Iichan."

"Wait, what was that?" "Wait, what the hell?"

Shito's doubt and my surprise came out in almost perfect harmony. Shito was bass, and I was tenor. However, our two-man acapella group wasn't exactly kind on the ears. For some reason, an awkward atmosphere had settled itself over Shito and me, so in an attempt to dispel it, I turned to Kunagisa and asked again, "what was that?"

"I said, Sacchan wants to talk to Iichan."

"Really?"

“Why!?” Shito yelled, no, it was more of a shriek. “Why does Utsurigi want to talk with a bastard like him?”

“Now *I’m* the *bastard*…… Do we need to have Suzunashi come lecture you as well?” Good grief, I sighed. “Still, I get where you’re coming from. Tomo, why did Utsurigi ask to speak with me?”

“Dunno,” Kunagisa answered point-blank. “I was just on my way out when he said, *can you send in the boy with the dead-fish eyes? I want to talk to him, just the two of us.*”

“*The boy with the dead-fish eyes*? That’s all he said? Then maybe he was talking about Shito.”

“No way.” “Not a chance”

Now it was a duet between a bass and soprano.

“It’s obviously you,” “It’s obviously Iichan,” “Of course.” “Of course.”

Now they had started singing a round. I didn’t even know what was going on anymore. “Alright, anyways,” I interrupted, forcibly severing their link.

“Leaving what my eyes look like aside, what on earth could Utsurigi want with me?”

“Like I said, I don’t know. Don’t ask me. But you’ll find out if you go, right?” Kunagisa pointed at the door she just came out of. “He asked for you specifically, so why don’t you have a little chat with him, Iichan? It’ll be fun. I’ll be waiting for you right here.”

With that, she gently took her place on the sofa. Shito was already making his way back down the hall towards us. “What’re you talking about, jeez,” he mumbled as he sat down too. “You guys are hopeless. Fine, hurry up and get it over with. I’ll be waiting here too.”

"It's fine if you want to go on ahead without us."

"If I did, you two wouldn't be able to get out, remember? Why else do you think I've been sitting around on my ass?" Shito slapped the table. "Just hurry-up and go."

"Fine… alright already."

It's not like I had much choice anyways. I had no idea what Utsurigi had planned for me, but I couldn't exactly see any way out of it. No part of me wanted to do it, and yet, do it I must. Careful not to let Shito hear, I leaned over and whispered into Kunagisa's ear. "Be careful. If anything happens, scream as loud as you can," and with that, I made my way down the hall towards the door.

Once there, I turned back towards Kunagisa.

"Hey, Tomo!"

I called out.

"Your talk with Utsurigi, how was it?"

"Fun!"

A concise answer. Honestly, what a Kunagisa Tomo-like reply. However, in the moment, I had lost sight of exactly what that meant. What did it mean for something to be Kunagisa Tomo-like? Something so simple had wound up so vague. I no longer knew. Like I found myself staring at an overexposed negative, I no longer knew.

Neither my own feelings towards her nor Kunagisa's feelings towards me.

Or maybe this was the exact situation in which I needed to hold firm. At the very least, the Kunagisa Tomo that sat on the couch beside Shito ought to be the Kunagisa Tomo that I knew, and with that thought in my head, I knocked once then swung the door open.

"Yo— nice to meet you."

—

I hadn't even entered the room when a high pitched voice greeted me from within. It was the kind of voice that could easily be mistaken for a woman's, as if he were deliberately speaking in falsetto. However, it was by no means gentle; it was a voice like a sharpened blade.

I stepped into the room and closed the door behind me. Then, returning the greeting, "nice to meet you," I replied. When I did, he flashed me a disarming smile.

He was sitting on the only piece of furniture in the entire room, the steel chair. Legs crossed, in a completely relaxed pose, he was facing me. With his chin slightly raised, he looked down on me as he studied my expression.

No words came. Faced with Utsurigi, not a single word came to mind.

"—I wish you wouldn't be so tense," finally, Utsurigi was the one to speak. "You were like that when we bumped into each other earlier as well. Why is it that you look at me as if I were your mortal enemy? It's been ages since I've been able to chat with anyone like this. And it's not like I've done anything to you yet, right? Look, you saw how Shito was earlier, even if we run into each other, he won't talk to me, look at me, or even approach me, and the others won't even set foot in here in the first place. I could really use the company. I'm a very lonely person. So lonely I can't stand it. So please, won't you say something?"

"It's been ages?"

I tilted my head at his choice of words. At the same time, some of my anxiousness evaporated. At the very least, he seemed like the kind of person who could be reasoned with. Maintaining the distance between us, I re-positioned myself slightly so that I was leaning on the right wall. And for the second time, I turned to face Utsurigi head-on.

"What are you talking about? Didn't you just talk with Kunagisa?"

"You mean *Dead Blue*? Woah now," Utsurigi chuckled. It was a terribly human gesture, wholly commonplace, but it's that very same normality that I found so viscerally disquieting. "Spare me. How am I supposed to respond to something like that? After all, you should know better than anyone, right? Or are you saying that you actually consider *Dead Blue*—Kunagisa Tomo human?"

"……………"

"C*ommunicating* with **It** would be impossible. For me, for you, for anybody. Isn't that right?"

As he sought my approval, his eyes were still grinning, however just behind them there wasn't a trace of levity to be found. As if he were searching for an opening, a breach in my defences. "I don't think that's true," I gave an indifferent response.

"More importantly, Mr. Utsurigi."

"Utsurigi is fine. And there's no need to stand around, why not have a seat?"

"On the floor?"

"It gets cleaned regularly, so it's not like it's dirty. Well, not like I've ever cleaned it. It's all Shito's contraption."

"I'll stand."

"Is that so?" Utsurigi nodded.

I rested a little more of my weight on the wall I was leaning on, lessening the burden on my left leg. It was so I could take off at a moment's notice. It may not have been necessary, but it didn't hurt to be prepared.

"Mr. Utsurigi, is there something you wanted to talk with me about?"

"Didn't I tell you to call me Utsurigi?" His shoulders shook. "I don't like being called mister. There's no need to stand on ceremony, so I'd like to ask you and Shito to stop. Goodness, what a bother. All of us at *Cluster* had no need for such formalities, so I find that far more comfortable."

"……Cluster, what's that?" It had been bothering me. "I've heard that name countless times since coming here… is it another name for *Team*?"

"To call it 'another name' misses the point." Utsurigi held up a single finger. "After all, we had no name to begin with. Each and every one of us just called it what we liked. I typically referred to us as *Cluster*. It's become the common nomenclature around here though. Well, I suppose that's my fault. If I'm not mistaken, *Cheetah* always called us *Mates.* For *Reverse Cross*, it was *Rustle*. And *Double-Flick* called us *Inside*. We weren't trying to form our own cliques or anything, **It** just loved word-play. The list of names goes on and on…… Ha-ha, we all just went with whatever we pleased. One of us even used a different name each time. That's why, whether you call it 'another name' or our 'real name,' both would be wrong. I simply called us *Cluster*, that's all there is to it. — and to *Dead Blue*, we were *Team.*"

"*Team."*

That word stole the air from my lungs.

"Oh my, after finally loosening up a little, you've gotten all tense again. Did something I say strike a nerve, perhaps? If so, I do apologize. I'm not often presented with the opportunity to talk to other people, so I'm not blessed with the usual social graces. Don't take it the wrong way."

"No, it's fine. Don't worry about it. Instead, Mr. Utsurigi–"

"I told you not to call me mister… well, whatever. I shouldn't expect you to cater to all my whims. Continue. What is it?"

"What did you talk with Kunagisa about?"

He was silent for a moment. "You-"

"You call her Kunagisa?"

"…Please answer my question."

"I'll answer if you answer, that's the law of reciprocity. Answer my question first. What do you typically call *The Verge*? Just like how I always called us *Cluster*, what do you call her?"

"……"

"For reference, when I, Utsurigi Gaisuke, talk to the woman herself, I call her *Dead Blue*. There are times I use that name when speaking of her as a third party, but usually, when I make reference to her like that, it becomes *Kunagisa Tomo.* When I speak about her as an abstract entity, I often abbreviate it to *The Verge*. For her pronouns, I use she/her, and on the extremely rare occasion, I use *It*. Those are about the only four I use."

I didn't understand the point of the question, so I hesitated in giving an answer. However, no matter how I thought about it, it didn't seem like the kind of question that bore any ulterior motive. In other words, it was simple curiosity. In the end, I went with a straightforward answer.

"When I'm talking to her directly, I use her given name, *Tomo*. When I'm trying to get her attention it's *hey you*. When I talk about her with someone else like this, I use her family name, *Kunagisa*, and I refer to her as *she* or *her.* There's only one exception, Nao… when I'm talking to Kunagisa's brother, I say *your sister*. He doesn't like it when people use her name."

"It's almost like you're talking about someone else. Not that that's a bad thing. One's past self is almost like a different person, after all."

Having said that, "hmm *Tomo, Kunagisa, hey you, her, and your sister, huh…?*" Utsurigi fed my line back to me, piecemeal.

"I see… that's the kind of person you are. Understood, understood, I read you loud and clear."

“Was that some kind of psychological test or something?”

Bolstered by the fact that I had regained some of my composure, my natural response was derision. “And? Just what kind of twisted feelings do I hold for Kunagisa?”

“That’s probably best left unsaid. No, best left unknown, perhaps?” Utsurigi appeared completely unfazed. “Still, you’re awfully gloomy, aren’t you? With those dead-fish eyes of yours.”

“*Dead-fish* is taking it a bit too far, don’t you think? The professor said they were *good eyes*.”

“And what good eyes they are. Nice and rotten. Speaking to you like this reminds me a little of *Cheetah*.”

With a grin, Utsurigi seemed like he was having a ball. Whether it was the simple act of conversing with me that he found so entertaining, or if it was the act of observing me itself– although perhaps in truth he found none of it enjoyable and was simply pretending– either way, I had no way of knowing.

“…I gave you your answer, so please answer my question already. What kind of conversation did you have with Kunagisa?”

“You must have some idea, surely. What do you think we talked about?”

“……”

“Ahh, sorry, sorry. Don’t worry, I’m not Socrates, even if I often get told we have the same nose. Answering a question with a question to get your opponent thinking isn’t a bad stance, it’s just not my style. If anything, I’m the kind of guy who talks and talks because he likes the sound of his own voice.”

“Is that so?”

"It is. Here's what *Dead Blue* said to me — ***I'll get you out of here***."

Utsurigi spoke like it was something to be proud of. As if just hearing those words come from Kunagisa's mouth was happiness itself.

"…And how did you answer?"

"I refused. Isn't that obvious?" He spoke like it was a matter of course. "We spoke about a number of other things as well, but that's private, so I hope you'll forgive me for not sharing. You don't want to hear how I handle my sexual urges after all, do you?"

Let's see. No, I most certainly did not.

"How could you refuse?"

"I just waved her away with my hand like this and said, *no, no, I'm fine, really.* …Don't look at me like that. Can't you take a joke? No need to side-eye me like that, I'm not sitting in the corner."

Whether it was at his own joke or something else, Utsurigi chuckled. His child-like behaviour was as unbefitting his age as his hair colour.

"Let's take turns with the questions. It's my turn next, isn't it? Let's make sure we agree on the order."

"…Then go ahead," I nodded somewhat half-heartedly, "but is there really anything else you want to ask me?"

"There is. Plenty."

I guess he had plenty.

"Then how about we start with a jab… Have you ever kissed Kunagisa Tomo?"

"………………"

An indescribable feeling welled up within me.

"By the way, I haven't."

Obviously. Considering the age gap, if he were to try something like that with a minor, it would be straight to jail with no room for extenuating circumstances. Not because it's a crime in the eyes of the law, but a crime against humanity itself.

"So, how about you?"

"…I have," this time my answer was even less than half-hearted. "And what of it?"

"Nothing, I was just jealous. Go on."

"What do you mean, *go on*? It's my turn to ask a question, right?" I raised my head and gazed intently upon Utsurigi's untroubled face. "Why did you refuse? Don't you want to get out of here?"

"You say some strange things don't you, both you and *Dead Blue*." Suddenly, Utsurigi sounded bored. "You two say some terribly strange things. I've been invited here to work as a research fellow, right? I get paid a wage, and it even comes with benefits. It's not like I'm locked up, or under house-arrest, or anything."

"…I heard that, out of all the results offered up to the Kunagisa house in the last year, out of all the experimental data and academic achievements that **bore Professor Shadou Kyouichirou's name**, the one responsible for as much as ninety percent of them was none other than **Utsurigi Gaisuke**."

"Who knows? Certainly not me. This is the first I'm hearing of it. But aren't those just baseless rumours?" Heh, Utsurigi laughed. "In this world, endless gossip and sensationalizing is done by those jealous of other people's success, you see."

"If you really aren't being held here as you say, then surely you have a way of getting out of here, of leaving the facility, right? No, do you even have a way to leave the Seventh Ward?" I badgered him. "Do you have an ID card? What about an ID code? Is your voice and retinal signature even

registered?"

"…………………"

He was quiet. Then he narrowed his glassy eyes and stared fixedly at me. I made a point of ignoring him, which took more than a little effort, and continued in detail.

"Have you ever left this building? I heard that you haven't. …Even with all your *specs* being exploited by Professor Kyouichirou, even with all your freedoms restricted, you still insist that there's no reason to leave?"

"You talk big, **young one**." Utsurigi closed his eyes. Then opening just the right one, he spoke. "You talk about freedom at your age? You'd speak of such lofty ideas at the age of nineteen? You're an awfully impudent one, aren't you?"

"…According to Kunagisa… No, to be more precise we heard it from Chee-kun. According to him, Professor Kyouichirou **has some dirt on you** that he's using to keep you here…"

"Ha-ha! *Dirt*, huh!?" Utsurigi clapped his hands together in front of him with full force. The dry sound echoed throughout the room. "*Dirt* is perfect! *Cheetah* sure is good at *encoding* his words! Hilarious. That's just too funny. I never expected such an entertaining story."

"Please answer the question, Mr. Utsurigi."

"Hahah, haha. Answer the question? Sure, I'll give you your answer, young one." His raucous laughter ceased, and slowly, he raised his head. "Let's see… are you aware of the animal known as a pig? A cow or chicken would work as well."

"I know what a pig is, obviously."

"Good. Then you must also be aware that the pig is a man-made animal that came about through the domestication of the wild boar, correct? Cows and chickens aren't the product of selective breeding, but they're

similar in the sense that they're domesticated. They're livestock. What do you think about that? Do you think they—and yes, my use of *they* is rather deliberate— do you think they, as living beings, have been subjugated by humanity?"

"…is there something wrong with that?"

"There is. It's not just wrong, it's completely backwards. Just look at the results; as a result of their domestication, as a result of selective breeding, they've flourished more than ever before. Protected by humans, nurtured by humans, propagated by humans, as a species their share among the world's animal populace exploded. Their symbiotic relationship– no, their parasitic relationship with humans has landed them an unshakeable position as a species. Am I wrong?"

"—sounds like nothing but sophistry to me."

"Specious reasoning is still reasoning, you know. Kind of like how the mantis shrimp is neither mantis nor shrimp, but the name still fits. Now then, is the position I'm in really all that bad? I've been given an entire research ward, and I'm even capable of talking with you like this. You speak of restrictions and freedom, but that's the same no matter where I am. Is there even such a thing as a life lived without restraint? There are those who sit at home watching television every day, who only get to know the people that they're supposed to, and even if they're free to come and go as they please, it's not like they can actually go anywhere they want. When compared to those people, I'm as free as they come. At the very least, my mind is completely liberated."

"You can't be serious."

"You're **free** to think what you want. No need to **restrict** yourself when talking to me."

Utsurigi took a second to straighten himself out, then, "alright, it's my turn to ask a question," he said.

"Have you ever slept with Kunagisa Tomo?"

"……Are all your questions going to be some form of sexual harassment?"

"It's fine isn't it? We're both men after all, so why not spill our guts to each other?" His expression was that of a lecherous old man. "Incidentally, I've never slept with *Dead Blue*."

"If you had it would've been a crime," I placed my head in my palm. "I haven't either."

"You haven't?" He was shocked. "What? No way, you're kidding right?"

"It's true. I wouldn't lie about something like that. I won't say that we've never gotten close, but well… it usually starts and ends with the proposition." I tried to sound as indifferent as possible, all the while wondering how I even ended up in this situation. "There, happy?"

"No, not at all. Something's not right." Utsurigi folded his arms across his chest with a huff. "You're straight, aren't you? And you don't have any weird proclivities? Or is that you're actually lusting after me right now?"

Like hell I am.

I ignored him and took my turn next.

"So what you're saying is that you have no intention of leaving this place?"

"That's not what I meant. It's not that I have no intention to leave, it's that there's no reason to. Take *Dead Blue* for example. I hear she's living the shut-in lifestyle off in her Kyoto mansion, isn't that right? And yet, you don't forcefully drag her outside, do you? Of course you don't. There's no real reason for her to leave. She's more than happy just staying inside, and it's not like it bothers anyone. I'm the same way. There's no need to go to space in order to know how spacious it is, right?"

“So you’re saying everything Kunagisa’s done for you is nothing more than unwelcome favours?”

“Oi, oi, what’s with the accusatory tone? That’s playing dirty.” Utsurigi raised an eyebrow facetiously. “You know that’s not true. I’m genuinely happy that Kunagisa Tomo has been thinking of me. You could even say I’m touched. But still, more than anything, I’m overjoyed to be reunited with *The Verge*. In that sense, I’m also grateful to you for bringing her here. Much obliged.”

“…You’re welcome.”

Sigh. It seemed like he wasn’t lying when he said he liked to hear himself talk. No matter which angle you attacked him from, his bias would deviate it from its mark, and he would easily deflect it.

He looked like nothing more than a dirty old man, but he had been a member of Kunagisa Tomo’s *Team*. I had to remember that.

“Now then, it’s my turn. Essentially, you don’t view Kunagisa Tomo as a woman, and while you may hold some platonic affection for her, it’s not romantic. Is that it?”

Oh? Finally, a relatively normal question.

“In other words, you’re not hot for Kunagisa Tomo’s loli body.”

“………………”

I was a fool for thinking otherwise.

“Incidentally, I am… just kidding, please don’t run away. Don’t leave me here. There’s no way I’d lust after someone more than fifteen years younger than me, right? Heaven forbid. Where I was raised, calling someone a pedo is a form of greeting. It’s true. If a joke like that bothers you so much, then you wouldn’t last a minute where I’m from. I’m begging you, please stop looking at me so suspiciously.”

"…" I sighed.

I vowed then and there that, no matter what happened, I would never visit this man's hometown, and as I did, I wondered if this was what Shito and Koutari had meant when they called him a *pervert.* If so, then that explained Shito's apprehension. I nonchalantly positioned myself so that I'd have easy access to the knife in my breast pocket.

"You kiss her. You hold her. But in the end, that's nothing more than the kind of affection one might show their little sister. Are you saying that Kunagisa Tomo is like a sister to you? That's not half bad. It's said that, in a way, there's no greater honour for a woman than to be viewed as a little sister."

"…"

"Incidentally, I have two little sisters of my o-"

"I don't want to hear it," I shut him down immediately, "and in Japan, people don't normally kiss their sisters. They don't hold each other either."

"What? Really?" His eyes shot open wide as if he were genuinely surprised. "—so that's how it is. You learn something new every day. Thank you. I'm glad we met."

I sighed again. Somehow even his gratitude was disgusting. "Regardless, Kunagisa is not my sister. At the very least, I've never thought of her that way. She may be as close to me as family, but that's only a matter of familiarity."

"Hmph. That expression tells me you don't think very much of your family. Hmm, I think I'm starting to understand what your problem is."

My problem? What the hell was he getting at? As far as I was concerned the only problem facing me right now was the man in front of me. Part of me wanted to cut the conversation short right there and walk out on him.

The only reason I didn't was because Utsurigi was part of Kunagisa's *Team.* No, it's a mistake to use past tense. They consider each other comrades even now, and it's because of that affiliation, I stood there and carried on the conversation. I needed to be more mindful.

"Alright then—" I strung some words together, and as I did I glanced all around the unfurnished room, "—why do you use this empty room as your *private room?*"

"Oh my. Completely changing up our approach, are we? I see, you're trying to put me off guard. Not bad, not bad. That's a sly way of doing things. You're rather nasty for someone with such a cute face. It seems like you're cleverer than you look." Utsurigi looked pleased. "The answer is simple. I hate when things are messy. Honestly— it's to the point where I'd rather be rid of this chair too, but if I took it that far people would surely think I'd gone mental."

"I think you're mental enough as is."

"No, no need to worry about me. The other rooms are all relatively messy. There are rooms that aren't so filthy as well, but you could hardly call them organized. Tidying isn't my strong suit; my specialty is destruction after all. This entire fourth floor is for my personal use, but if you get a chance on your way back, feel free to check out the second and third floors. My workstations are as cluttered as the Tokyo dump."

"I'll pass." I turned down Utsurigi's proposition. "There's bound to be all kinds of classified projects, isn't there? Shito would be furious at me. After all, isn't that why they chose this room for us to meet in the first place?"

"I think I remember Kyouichirou saying something to that effect… Haha, he's quite the taskmaster, that man."

When Utsurigi referred to the professor as *that man,* I couldn't detect any hint of malice, or resentment, or any other natural human emotion one might have in response to being imprisoned. Though, that isn't to say that the opposite was true either. There wasn't a trace of respect or good will one

might show their employer.

Just…what on earth is this man thinking? I couldn't grasp it.

"Alright, my turn."

"Take it easy on me, if you could."

"Sure thing, champ," Utsurigi gave quite the dated response. "Question: How much interest do you have in the opposite sex?"

"…The normal amount, I guess," shrugging off his typical sexual harassment, I answered. "It's only natural, right?"

"Haha. Still not cottoning on, huh?" In a manner that made me question whether he could read my mind, he responded with yet another dated expression. "Allow me the pleasure of providing you with an *epigraph* of my fellow *Cluster* member, *Double-Flick*. After all, there's no greater joy than being able to brag about one's treasured friends."

"…"

Double-Flick.

So this was the guy that Kunagisa called *Hiichan*, huh?

"What kind of epigraph are we talking about?"

"His thoughts on women. *Take a dog, for example. I wouldn't kick it. I wouldn't smash its head in with a brick. If it were starving and I had bread in my hand, I would likely feed it. If it wagged its tail and followed by my heel, I would pat its head, and if it rolled onto its back, I would even scratch its belly. If it wanted to run wild around my room, I would let it. And if it bit my hand, I would probably forgive it. However, that doesn't mean I would want to collar that dog.*"

"…The treasured friend you're bragging about is quite the downer, Mr. Utsurigi," I gave my honest opinion. "You shouldn't compare women to dogs."

"Haha. If I remember correctly *Cheetah* said something similar. This is how *Double-Flick* responded, *oh, then wouldn't that mean that you're looking down on dogs as lesser? Hm, you're a bigot through and through. What a hypocrite. What a truly despicable man. You'd be better off dead. Not that your life holds any meaning in the first place. As long as you live, you will cause nothing but trouble for those around you, and only by dying, can you finally grant them peace. The only worthwhile thing you can do is kick the bucket, and that puts you even below a mutt. I see, I thought you were a Cheetah, but it looks like you're just a dog. Hilarious. Hey pooch, I've got a bone for ya right here.* They broke out into a scuffle after that.

"…sounds fun."

It was a somewhat difficult story to comment on, so I was just filling dead air.

"Fun is an emotion we were not privy to. Now then, If you insist that Kunagisa Tomo wasn't like a sister to you, then how about a pet?"

"…………"

"After all, she's as loyal as a dog, isn't she? **To you, anyway**."

His clarification held some kind of deeper meaning. Brimming with confidence, the way he carried himself suggested a trump card up his sleeve. It didn't seem like a simple bluff or empty posturing.

"In reality, *Dead Blue* has been of great convenience to you. After all, she's a direct descendent of the Kunagisa House. She has connections to a lineage willing to happily shell out all the cash required for someone like *The Mad Demon* to build such a magnificent research facility on the side of a mountain. Even if she's been cast out, her influence is nothing to scoff at. She has her older brother, Kunagisa Nao after all, and besides him, she has many supporters within the Kunagisa House. Just by being at her side, your life is basically assured."

"………"

“And then there’s the woman herself, with her blue hair and childish frame despite her age. She has far more eccentricities than that, but she’s still a conventionally attractive girl. She’s too cute, certainly more than enough to **get you going**. To be able to get her to do whatever you want, whatever you desire, as a man, it’s an awfully enticing position.”

“What an awful conversation,” I cut him off. “Who do you take me for?”

“…Haha. So even a man like you can get mad, huh?” His expression seemed to say, *bullseye*. “Is that because I insulted you? Or is it because I belittled your feelings for Kunagisa Tomo? Or maybe it’s because I was right.”

“I’m not mad. I just found it unpleasant, that’s all.”

“I wonder. I find it quite pleasant. Endlessly so. Discussing a friend with a friend of a friend, there’s nothing more joyous than this. …Say, how familiar are you with computers?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m particularly good with them,” I answered, wary about the sudden change in topic. “I did take some basic electronics classes though.”

“Ahh. That reminds me, *The Verge* told me something. She mentioned you had some connections with illustrious think tank, the ER3 System.” Utsurigi nodded, seemingly convinced of something. “I see, I see. It’s as I thought, you’re smarter than you look.”

“Kunagisa spoke about me?”

“Yes. Do you want to know what she said? Do you want to know what kinds of words she used to describe you?”

“No. I’m fine.”

As if the immediacy of my refusal revealed something about me, Utsurigi grinned. It was a horrid smile.

"…Computers are by far the most outstanding of mankind's creations. I'm not speaking of the hardware, but rather the software. It follows intricate problems, using a logic incomprehensible to the average person, and yet they still operate at ultrafast speeds. Capable of anything, and operating in an extensive language entirely separate from the ones used by humans, they can arrive at a solution in five minutes when it would take a human one hundred years to even get close. On the other hand, despite being these unknowable, incomprehensible devices, they are made to be controlled by the everyman. You flip a switch and the machine powers off. Some say that's the reason why computers took off in popularity. That the mere act of operating a computer satisfies a furtive desire that lurks within, *the desire to force something far greater than you to bow at your heel.*"

"…I"

"No matter what, humans want to be the ones in control. Now then, having briefly touched on the filthy desires of humanity, let us turn the conversation back to Kunagisa Tomo. She is, without a doubt, a *Genius*. First, let's call special attention to her memory. It's so absurd that you can't help but wonder whether her brain is actually composed of disk drives. She's the pinnacle of humanity in terms of RAM. There is not a person alive who has looked upon her programs and not been mesmerized. Beauty is the absence of waste and excess. It means a lack of superfluousness and redundancy. The programs that *Dead Blue* produced were free of any and all waste. And not just her programs. With regards to the hardware she produced as an engineer, be it motherboards or CPUs, there was not a single redundancy. Within *Cluster, Dead Blue* was unparalleled when it came to *not being wasteful*."

"…"

"Do you know what they called *Dead Blue* when she was young? Of course you do. How could you not? It was a single word. *Savant*. Of course there's no need to borrow the French term; whether it's the English term, genius, or the Japanese term, *tensai*, or the German term, the Chinese term, or even Swahili, the meaning doesn't change. Talent has no borders. Back when I was a solitary hacker all on my lonesome, back when I still dreamt of

solitude, when I heard a rumour that the cloistered granddaughter of the Kunagisa Head held such innate genius, it honestly made me shudder."

"You…shuddered?"

"I shuddered, I shivered, I even trembled. We certainly don't see eye to eye, you and I, but we should at least agree on that, right? Either out of jealousy or out of devotion, we sought to learn all about her. Naturally, I tried to reach out to her as well— at the time I'm sure I considered it establishing communications *with the enemy.* However— I tried every means at my disposal, but as you might expect, the Kunagisa Syndicate didn't make it easy. I had no choice but to give up. That's why, when she was putting *Cluster* together and reached out to me herself— I wept with joy. That's not an exaggeration, I actually wept. If you want to laugh, then go right ahead. I was already a thirty year-old man who had felt like he'd been saved by a fourteen year-old girl after all."

"…………"

Of course, I didn't laugh.

It wasn't a laughing matter.

"Honestly, what a farce. What an awful joke. Just think about it. We were a collection of nine of the world's greatest minds— although it's a little embarrassing to say so myself— and yet all we managed to accomplish was playing along with the whims of a child. What a waste of talent. I felt like our genius had been pathetically squandered. Essentially— had we used our power for **noble** pursuits— had we acted as allies of justice, we could have made this planet a paradise. Or do you think I'm exaggerating?"

"—I don't. If you lot had been better people, I'm sure saving the world would have been as easy as pie. But that's a pointless hypothetical. In the end, that's just how geniuses are. The nine members of *Cluster*— Kunagisa included, are no exception. That includes everyone at this facility and all the geniuses I've met so far as well, there isn't a drop of decency among them. And when I say decency, I'm not referring to fitting into *societal*

expectations. They were all—detached somehow. If anything, a respectable genius would be one hell of an exception. I'm not such a starry-eyed maiden that I'd expect decency from those with talent."

"Do you have a problem with starry-eyed maidens?"

"What makes you say that? At the very least, I prefer them to middle-aged men."

"Is that a knock at me? Still, I suppose you're right. Geniuses are often at odds with society. Which is to say, the thing we call society has never been kind to those with talent. You can't expect anyone to harbour purely positive feelings towards geniuses capable of undermining your self-worth at any moment after all."

"…Give me a break." I could no longer stand it. "If you have something to say, then why not just say it? There's a limit to how roundabout you can be. No, you're not even being indirect. You're just rambling. You may not be as verbose as Goethe, but in all honesty, if you were a novel, then I would've stopped reading right here."

"That's a rotten shame. We were just getting to the fun part."

"I can't see how."

"It takes great courage to finish a boring book without throwing it at the wall— supposedly. According to Osamu Dazai, anyhow. Lonesome geniuses always say such wonderful things, don't you agree?"

"…Then should I expect something worth mustering my courage for?"

"Yes, please do. Of that, I can assure you. I swear by the name of *Malignant Green*. …Still, genius— it's a marvellous word, but I can't help feeling it's far too overused nowadays. Just look around. It's not especially hard to pull off something others might consider genius. Take the people at this facility, do you think a single one of them hasn't worn that title before? That goes for Shito, and Misachi as well. Although, I can't speak for *The*

Verge's tagalongs, you and your chaperone Suzunashi. Labels like genius aren't that big of a deal. What's difficult is convincing yourself that they're true. Of course I'm not merely talking about believing it."

"What's the difference between being convinced and believing?"

"Who knows? Maybe there isn't one. At the very least, I doubt that any distinction that you or I might come up with would be worth anything. That said, even you know the difference between conviction and a guess, right? Someone guesses a six, then rolls the dice. And wouldn't you know, it's a six. Now then, did the person making the prediction just pull off something remarkable? Of course not. But if the person was **convinced** that the result would be a six, then it's a completely different story. It was no fluke— it was unmistakable talent. Long ago, there was a time where I guessed that I might have been a genius. But I was mistaken. It's quite the embarrassing memory. All this to say, Kunagisa Tomo, she is— awfully self-aware about such things, don't you think? Deeply convinced of her own genius, deeply aware of her own brilliance."

"It's unusual for you to use such a cheap turn of phrase, Mr. Utsurigi. What a flimsy metaphor. I can also attest to her genius, but—"

"Yes you can, as can I. However the one who can best attest to it is Kunagisa Tomo herself. Self-awareness and self-consciousness are nothing if not an aspect of self-confidence, but I'm sure you don't need me to explain that to you, is there? If one is seeking a relative assessment, then they would need the ability to see themselves through others' eyes. However, in order to be judged absolutely, more than anything else, one must know themselves. Not to understand themselves in relation to those around them, but to understand themselves as an individual. Without toil, without any need for trials or tribulations, capable of living independent of the world, now *that* is genius. *That* is conviction."

"……………"

"That said, she may possess blinding genius, but in exchange, **everything else** suffers for it. When it comes to tinkering with machines and

compiling programs, Kunagisa Tomo is without flaw, but when she tries to do anything else, she is incompetence personified. Such an imbalance in competencies is seen in the well-known Idiot Savant Syndrome, or the more recent Asperger's Syndrome, but her case is far too distinct for such commonplace diagnoses. Her infantile mannerisms, her disconnected thought process. Not to mention, she demonstrates complete inadequacy whenever it comes to other people, isn't that right? After all, she has no **emotions**. That may be hyperbole, but she's most certainly lacking. Or maybe she isn't. Maybe she just doesn't know how to control them. In essence, she doesn't understand how other people feel. Human relationships are a lot like looking in the mirror after all. It's only when you consider that others think in the same way that you do that you begin to understand them. But there's no way to communicate with someone who doesn't even appear in the mirror. Listen, I shouldn't even be saying this…but allow me to anyways. When all's said and done, the *Genius* Kunagisa Tomo can't survive on her own. She is far too exceptional to live by herself. And yet, it is her exceptional nature that makes it so that she must live alone. Hehe, how amusingly *psychological*." Then Utsurigi gestured to me. "…If it weren't for someone like you, Kunagisa Tomo wouldn't be able to go on living. Regardless of whether it needed to be you in the first place, in order to survive, Kunagisa Tomo has no choice but to completely rely on you for the basic necessities of daily living. If you were to liken Kunagisa Tomo to a computer, then she'd be some primitive mechanism from before the advent of the OS. Now then, here's a question: how would you say it feels having a genius under your care?"

"…Hang on, that's too many questions, Mr. Utsurigi," I said, still looking down. "It's basic etiquette to only ask one question per turn, maybe two at most."

"Perhaps. You may be right, but surely you can do me the courtesy, can't you? Favours freely given are a great way to grease some palms after all. So answer, won't you? How does it feel to **own** Kunagisa Tomo?"

"Do you expect me to say, *she's mine, I won't let anyone take her,* or something?" I raised my head to stare directly at Utsurigi. "What a joke. If you want her, go ahead and take her."

“………”

“I can’t explain myself to you. I can’t even explain it to myself.”

“Hehe, it’s not that you can’t, it’s that you won’t, isn’t it? You’re dead-set against it.” Utsurigi didn’t let up. “You can’t help but be frightened of what you might have to say for yourself, right? You’re terrified about what might happen if you let yourself care. You’re afraid of being afraid. You can’t help being horrified of yourself, isn’t that right?”

“Maybe. But even so, what of it? That doesn’t give you the right to moan about it. And even if it did, I’d rather not hear it. Kunagisa’s my friend, and I, hers. Isn’t that good enough?”

“Sure. For now.” Utsurigi nodded. “It’ll do for now, but you two… eventually you’ll hit the wall. Such a vague and uncertain relationship can’t last forever. It’s fine as long as you understand that. When you hit the wall and die, it’ll all be over. I wonder if you’ll understand then. To me, it looks like you’re merely averting your eyes. Alright, that’s my turn. Now then, let’s hear a question from you.”

Utsurigi readied himself for my question by leaning back in the chair and resting all his weight on it. I was unsure what to ask next. No, I already knew what I wanted to ask. I was merely hesitating over whether or not I should ask it. In the end, I did.

“…… Mr. Utsurigi. *Team* …or I guess *Cluster,*”

“Call it whatever you like. We were an anonymous group anyway.”

“…Why did you create **such a thing** in the first place?”

I said.

“What possessed you to form *Team*… or *Cluster* or whatever? What made you do the things you did?”

“…So that’s what you wanted to get at, huh?”

The look in his eyes changed. His Cheshire cat-like eyes that only ever appeared to be smiling on the surface disappeared completely; they pierced into me and hollowed me out, an honest, unconcealed gaze.

"Easy. Answering a question like that would be dozens, no, hundreds of times easier than twisting the arm of a baby. It's so simple I could manage it in a single sentence. …but if I'm being honest, I don't really feel like it."

"…? What do you mean?"

"It means that if I tell you the honest truth, I'd only end up betraying your expectations. It's a crying shame, but I don't have the answer that you're looking for. If it were *Double-Flick*, he might have had something for you, but not me."

"………"

"Do you still want to ask?"

Utsurigi ran his hands through his grey hair. Then he removed his sunglasses and placed them in the pocket of his lab coat before finally staring at me with his naked eyes.

"If you do, I'll answer. But it won't be out of the kindness of my heart. If anything, it'll be with contempt for **stealing** Kunagisa Tomo from **us**. I want you to know that. Even so, do you still want to hear it?"

"I do."

Without a moment's hesitation, without faltering for an instant, I nodded. As indecisive and half-assed as I was, I did not waver.

"Please tell me, Mr. Utsurigi."

"Because *Dead Blue* willed it."

It really only took one sentence.

His answer truly was that simple.

"We were just following orders. If she spoke, we obeyed. She wasn't just our leader. She was our Kaiser. We were *The Verge*'s pawns, her slaves."

"U—"

My body sagged.

My knees felt like they were going to give out. My legs alone could no longer support my whole weight, and I braced myself firmly against the wall. Even that was not enough; I clung to the wall with both hands. It felt like the wall might collapse on me. No, the only one about to collapse was me. Still, it felt like if I didn't do something, then this would be the end of me.

"—tsurigi—"

I. I. I. I. I.

And. Just as I tried to formulate a sentence,

"Oi you, just how much longer are you planning to talk!?"

Shito's hollering came accompanied by a violent knock from beyond the door.

"Give it a rest already! What the hell are you even doing!?"

"Hehe…" Upon hearing his voice, Utsurigi shrugged his shoulders and sat up in his chair. He took the sunglasses from his lab coat pocket and put them on. His eyes regained their usual smirk.

"It's alright, Shito! Our talk's already over! …Hehe, I guess that's all for now. I still had plenty of questions for you, but it looks like this is it, **friend of Kunagisa**."

"…Yes, it does." It took all my leg strength to pick myself up off the wall. "It sure seems that way, *Mr. Malignant Green*."

"Hehe. Come again tomorrow. Let's have a more constructive talk then. You'll be staying here for the next day or two anyway, won't you?"

“Yeah, sure. It’ll probably turn out that way…”

“Bring your chaperone, Suzunashi, with you. From what I’ve heard from *Dead Blue*, she’s a remarkably fascinating woman. Just as fascinating as you.”

“She’ll lay you out if you harass her.”

“I’m ever grateful for your concern,” unperturbed by my sarcasm, Utsurigi smiled, “but rest assured, despite how I look, my body’s quite hardy. I can take a punch. Hehe, well then, give everyone my best.”

“Everyone…?” I tilted my head. “What do you mean?”

“I mean everyone. Shito and the professor, Misachi and all the other researchers too. I hear you’re already acquainted with Neo and Koutari, right?”

“Yeah. The long-haired man and the fat man.”

“Exactly.” Utsurigi nodded. “There’s nothing to be done about Neo’s weight— he has a predisposition towards obesity, you see— but Koutari’s long hair is going to wind up damaging his eyesight. Can you warn him about that for me?”

“Understood,” I said. “In that case, pardon me.” I went to open the door.

“Hang on a second,” As I did, Utsurigi called out after me.

“What is it?” I asked without turning around. My right hand was already gripping the door knob. This single door stood between me and Shito, and Kunagisa was not far off.

“It’s my last turn, friend of Kunagisa.”

“…That’s odd.” I didn’t turn around. “You asked the first question. It wouldn’t be fair to have you end it as well, would it?”

“Then next time we’ll start with you. How does that sound? Besides, this question is just like the one you asked me; it has a simple answer. It’ll be over in a single sentence. It shouldn’t take up any of your time.”

“Hmm…fine then. What is it?”

Utsurigi didn’t answer immediately, he let it sit in the air for a moment. Then he spoke.

“You—”

He asked me,

“———You—”

He slowly gouged his way into my brain.

“You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don’t you?”

2

Several minutes later— Kunagisa and I had, once again, returned to Professor Shadou Kyouichirou's Primary Ward. In the fourth floor parlour where we held our audience with Professor Kyouichirou, Kunagisa and I sat side-by-side. We were alone. Professor Kyouichirou was apparently absorbed in an experiment on the third floor, so Shito had gone to report that *Kunagisa and Utsurigi's meeting had concluded.*

As such, it was just the two of us.

Kunagisa and I.

Us two.

…but was that really the case?

Perhaps this room simply contained one and one, and the two of us were never truly together.

"…? Iichan?"

Finally, Kunagisa peered over at me. She looked up at me with big eyes.

"Hey, Iichan. You haven't said a word in ages. Did something happen?"

"…Hm?" I raised my head. "Huh? I wasn't talking? Strange. I swear I was passionately theorising about the aristocratic control and religious conflicts of mediaeval Europe."

"You weren't."

"No, I'm pretty sure I was."

"And I'm saying that you weren't"

"And yet, I was!" I was forced to double down. "As a descendant of Napoleon, it's my duty to give such matters the consideration they deserve. Besides, as one destined to reign over all of Europe, it's essential that I have a firm grasp on its history."

"Iichan, did Sacchan pick on you or something?"

I was ignored.

Kunagisa looked the slightest bit uneasy. She seemed worried about me as the words left her lips.

"He doesn't usually do that to people he doesn't care about. But I still can't think of a single reason why he'd insist on talking to you."

"…No, he didn't say anything in particular. Nothing at all, really. He only really asked about your condition and how you were feeling." I came up with a normal sounding answer. "I guess he just wanted someone else's perspective on how you were doing. He didn't say anything about me."

"Hmm…"

Kunagisa didn't look convinced, but she nodded anyway.

I threw myself back in my chair and gazed up at the ceiling. A fan spun above us, circulating the air throughout the room. I gazed at the meaningless fixation as if I could glimpse the invisible air current around me. I slowly let out a breath, trying to change the current if only a little.

Of course, the act was meaningless as well.

There was no meaning at all.

"…………"

I was once asked,

Are you in love with my sister?

Someone once asked me,

Do you like her?

In response to both of them, my immediate reply was *not especially, no.* Both times, on both occasions, that was my answer. It would likely be my answer the third and fourth time too. And if I gave the same answer the fifth time, then the sixth was sure to be no different.

An immediate answer accompanied by a shake of the head.

However—

You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don't you?

Far from having an immediate answer to Utsurigi's question, in the end, I couldn't answer it at all. I couldn't answer.

"……why?"

That question, that simple question, how come I couldn't muster the single sentence necessary to answer it?

There was no need to be truthful. There was no need to be honest. When talking to a man like that, truth and honesty were secondary. All I needed to do was let the topic pass, even if I had to spin a yarn to do so.

Like I had for her in May.

If I had used nonsense, everything would have been fine.

So why…?

"How despicable…what a slime ball. Even audacity had its limits. No, forget audacity, this guy doesn't know his place…what is this scumbag even doing?"

Wouldn't he be better off dead?

Why is he even alive?

"……it's just too pathetic…"

"Huh? Did you say something, Iichan?" Kunagisa tilted her head. "I couldn't quite hear you."

"…Nah, just talking to myself. I'm basically half monologue after all. Anyway," I forced myself to speak in a bright, lighthearted tone, "not to sound like Suzunashi, but he was surprisingly normal. Utsurigi, that is. I was expecting an incomprehensible crackpot like you or Chee-kun."

But I could understand him.

Normally, that would be to my advantage. But honestly…leave it to *Team*'s very own disruptor, *Malignant Green.* I had to tip my hat to him.

He was capable of destroying even nonsense.

"I wouldn't call Sacchan… normal exactly." Kunagisa was uncharacteristically hesitant. "I can't really explain it all that well though. Still, what a pain."

"A pain? What is?"

"He told you too, didn't he Iichan? Sacchan says he's not planning on leaving."

"Ahh…that, huh? He did say that, didn't he?" It's not that he's not planning on it, rather, it's that he has no interest in it. What seemed to interest him instead was my relationship with Kunagisa. "You didn't try to convince him?"

"I mean, I didn't not try to convince him. It's just— those words ring awfully hollow when it comes to Sacchan. He's not the kind to stop just 'cause I say so. Utsurigi Gaisuke doesn't recognise *red lights* at all— Only the *Malignantly Green*."

“He wouldn’t even stop for you…? You’re his leader, aren’t you?”

“Ex-leader. But even when it came to *Team*, everyone just did as they liked… We’re lucky that we managed to stick together. That’s why *Team* didn’t so much disband as collapse. When talent swells too much, it becomes too much to handle—that’s a painful memory I’d rather not get into though.”

“Given what happened to Chee-kun, you might be right…”

“Ahhh, what a pain in the neck. Have you ever met someone filled with so much woe?”

Kunagisa folded her arms sternly, and just then, stepping through the door one after the other, came Professor Kyouichirou and Misachi. This was the first time I’d seen the professor up and about. Far from how he had appeared earlier, he had the small body of an old man. He was carrying what looked like a wooden cane, the kind you would think came from a bygone era. That said, I got the feeling that, when he was younger, he boasted a rather impressive physique; there were still traces of it here and there.

Professor Kyouichirou took one look at Kunagisa and I, and without making an attempt to hide his disdain, he sneered at us.

“How was it?”

He said in his coarse voice.

“Your reunion with an old friend, I trust it went well, Lady Kunagisa?”

“Yup. It was super fun,” Kunagisa replied with a smile. “Better than my wildest dreams. It was totally worth coming out here. He said he wants to talk tomorrow too.”

“Right, right. How nice.” In response, the professor laughed lightheartedly.

“But don’t overdo it and distract him from his work, Lady Kunagisa.

We didn't come all the way to this mountain to relax after all. Unlike you, I don't have *time and money to spare*, Lady Kunagisa."

"Money aside, I believe I already mentioned that I don't have as much time as you think. Although, I'm pretty sure you're already well aware of that," Kunagisa said. "You've figured it out, so there's no real point in hiding it now. More importantly, professor. I'd like to get down to business. Do you have the time and patience for a chat right now?"

"Patience? That won't be a problem. I have plenty of patience for youngsters."

Moving at a leisurely pace, Professor Kyouichirou made his way over and stood looming over the still-seated Kunagisa. He was still for a moment as he glared down at her.

"However—it appears your chaperone isn't here. Is it really okay to proceed with such an unreliable boy at your side, Lady Kunagisa?"

"I'm grateful for the consideration, but that's a needless concern, professor. You already know, don't you? Just what kind of person Iichan is."

"……………"

Professor Kyouichirou brazenly clicked his tongue in irritation, then he turned to Misachi.

"You. Leave,"

He said.

"Huh? But, professor—"

"I won't suffer any back-talk. Let me put it simply, I'm telling you to *disappear*."

"…………"

"Want me to make it even simpler?"

"—No, I understand."

As she was told, Misachi gave a single bow, and then, without protest, she shuffled out of the room so quietly I didn't hear a single footstep. She had a maid's talent, so in that sense, Shito's invention had been a grave loss, but I suppose everyone has their circumstances.

Talent, huh— still, not to sound like Kunagisa, but in a research facility like this, those words rang awfully hollow. In the presence of two geniuses, how much meaning did words like talent carry? This proverbial pond was small enough already.

Kunagisa snickered loudly.

"Typical, you still never think of people as people, professor. I'll never understand why a professor like that is working towards artificial intelligence."

"You'll never understand? Colour me surprised. That doesn't sound like you at all, Lady Kunagisa."

"…………"

"Hmph. What an inordinately unpleasant child you are." His words dripped with venom, as he brought himself even closer to Kunagisa. "That expression, those eyes, those lips, those features, that body, that smile, that tone, every last bit of it gets under my skin."

"Hang on, professor…" I interjected without thinking. "A gentleman should watch how they speak, shouldn't they?"

"A gentleman? Only an ignorant child would expect such a thing from *The Mad Demon*." The professor laughed. "It's not as if I was particularly rude either. After all, there's not a thing I could say that could offend Lady Kunagisa here. She never paid me any mind in the first place. Isn't that right, Lady Kunagisa?"

"That's a nasty way of looking at it, professor. There's no need for

such a twisted outlook, is there?"

"But it's the truth. That's who you are, is it not? You have your eyes set on Utsurigi Gaisuke and nothing else. That's right, you would never even glance at someone like me; you wouldn't even try." The professor continued. "Do you remember— I suppose that's a stupid thing to ask. Seven years ago, when the facility was still situated in Hokkaido, do you remember what happened the day you and your dear brother, Kunagisa Nao, came to visit?"

"…………"

"It's a day I'll never forget. Listen here boy," the professor was suddenly addressing me. "This young lady, only twelve years-old at the time, when she saw the results of the research I'd been working on for thirty years, what do you think she said?"

"…I'm not sure. I can't even imagine."

"*This is truly remarkable research*," Kunagisa interrupted, "*unless I got serious, it would take me three whole hours to pull it off*— that's what I said."

"…………"

I could picture it clearly. She uttered those words while wearing the same smile she had worn for me six years ago, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Not bearing any ill-will or malice, not intending to hurt or offend, without once having imagined that it had taken the professor thirty years.

She nonchalantly—

Trampled him underfoot.

"That's not my fault. Nao-kun never told me that the professor spent his entire career working on something like that. What a jerk. Right, Iichan?"

"Hmph. Of course, that **whelp** was terribly unpleasant as well." The

professor directed his spite at one of his Kunagisa Syndicate backers. "I swear — you siblings alike crushed me under your boots. After all this time, I still have dreams about that day."

I turned to Kunagisa. "—for the record, what did Nao say?" I asked in a whisper. She groaned, and then,

"*Pay it no mind, professor. Please disregard my sister's remarks and continue your research,"*

She said, mimicking his mannerisms.

"That sounds normal to me."

"Right? I wonder what he said wrong." Kunagisa tilted her head curiously. "Then again, maybe he flubbed it by adding, *after all, as an illustrious descendent of the Kunagisa House, I can't allow my esteemed sister to engage in such menial labour."*

"That'd do it."

I wasn't about to offer the professor a shoulder to cry on, but it's only natural that having your entire body of research trashed by such preposterous siblings wouldn't wind up a happy memory.

"But that was ages ago, professor." Kunagisa turned back to face him. "Those were the words of a little girl. You shouldn't take them to heart."

"Youth and femininity are also talents, Lady Kunagisa. Wouldn't you agree?"

"…So what? I didn't come all this way to reminisce about old memories. I had no intention of taking you lightly, but if I did, then why don't we have a talk more befitting of the academics we both are? You certainly don't seem like someone who's willing to talk."

"The same goes for you, did you ever have any intention of negotiating, Lady Kunagisa? No matter what happened, weren't you planning

on stealing Utsurigi from me?"

"How awful."

"And yet, that's exactly what you're planning. You're trying to make off with one of the members of this facility, one of my employees."

"…………."

"I won't let you have him."

The professor stated plainly.

"No matter what happens— I don't care if you're a Kunagisa— I have no intention of handing him over. I'm most certainly not willing to talk. My opinion on the matter won't change— so Utsurigi Gaisuke's won't be changing either."

"—there it is."

Kunagisa shrugged her shoulders languidly.

"That's what I've been looking for. You see, Sacchan— he's not the type to ever bend his will to someone. Even when he was working for *Team,* Sacchan was the hardest to **control**. You could manage him, but you certainly couldn't control him. That's the reason behind his name, *Malignant Green*. Sacchan was probably the only member of *Team* that I wasn't sure I could handle. So I've been wondering how the professor managed to bind such a man to his will."

"I did nothing of the sort. He and I simply desire the same thing. Our fields of research are similar, so when we started working together, we hit it off."

He was lying through his teeth. Thinking back on my conversation with Utsurigi, that much was clear. However, that must be the official explanation given the current circumstance.

"…I was hoping you'd approach the conversation with a little more

humanity. Though I suppose that was wishful thinking on my part."

"Humanity, eh?" The professor spoke sarcastically. "But a humane conversation is something that really ought to be held between two humans, isn't that right—**little miss monster**?"

"Iichan!"

Kunagisa shouted.

Not at the professor, but at me.

At me, who had already left my seat.

"Stop. Don't move."

"……………"

"What do you accomplish by flying off the handle here of all places? We're in the middle of a conversation."

"……………"

"Iichan."

"……okay."

"……………"

"I said okay."

"……………"

"I said okay already. I get it."

Retaking my seat, I unclenched my fist. To grant myself at least some sense of comfort, I glared daggers at the professor, but he didn't even seem to notice. He just huffed.

"I see. It seems Lady Kunagisa was correct, you might not be some

snivelling brat after all."

"………maybe not."

"Listen here, boy. You seem furious that I don't consider Lady Kunagisa here human, but in that sense, are you any different? Do you have any idea, boy, what it feels like for an old man to be looked down upon by such a young girl?"

"How could I?" I answered, annoyed. This discontent was different from the kind I felt when talking to Utsurigi. "*Do you even understand how I feel*? I don't want to hear such a self-centered line from someone older than me."

"Of course you couldn't. You don't have a clue. You don't have the slightest idea what level of talent sits beside you."

"……………"

"Isn't that right, boy? To tell the truth, I'm the slightest bit envious." If only a little, some of the hostility left his voice. "No, envy isn't quite right. You see— from where I'm standing, you're managing to do something utterly remarkable without even trying. The triumph of being by Kunagisa's side."

"………Triumph?"

"Yes, triumph. You ought to be proud. I may be the *Mad Demon,* but before all that I'm still just a person; I have an eye for such things. That girl sitting there is an untouchable genius. At one time, they said the same about me, but I can admit her extraordinary talent has long outstripped my own—and yet, to yearn to be by her side like that, I can't comprehend it."

"……………"

"I probably wouldn't be able to stand it. It'd be unbearable. Even death would be preferable to being by that monster's side."

"…Watch it."

“Don’t act like you don’t feel any sense of inferiority towards her, boy,” Professor Kyouichirou spoke. “Judging by your reaction just now, you’re not some an insensitive idiot that doesn’t feel a thing about Kunagisa Tomo.”

“You’re starting to sound like Utsurigi.”

Although their stances were in completely opposite directions.

Malignant Green worshipped *Dead Blue* like a god.

The *Mad Demon* abhorred the *Blue Savant* as a monster.

However, despite their vectors veering in opposite directions, the things they said were the same. In that sense that they both took me for some helpless fool, they were identical.

Still,

“Shut the hell up, I’m sick and tired of listening to people talk like that. Each and every one of you just loves to stereotype. Are you a broken record or something? It’s pathetic. You think you can just judge people by your own self-serving metric, it’s-”

“Professor,”

Kunagisa cut me off. It was unusual for Kunagisa to interrupt someone mid-sentence. What’s more, it was me who she was interrupting.

“Professor, that’s enough of that. I couldn’t care less for this drivel about genius and talent. Spare me any more painful discussion about values or ideology. Let’s leave that kind of philosophising for the liberal arts. You’re a scientist aren’t you? To tell the truth, I’m truly sorry that your brain’s compleeetly devoid of talent, but stop trying to make that my fault. Your incompetence is no business of Kunagisa Tomo’s.”

“—Wha-”

Kunagisa’s abrasive words turned professor’s face red. This was the

first time I'd seen Kunagisa so blatantly provoke someone.

"That's all this is right? You can't do anything yourself, so you locked up Sacchan to do it for you. I'm not sure how you managed to persuade, coerce…or blackmail him into helping you, but how about you stop acting like a big shot over other people's work? No, if that was all it was, then I wouldn't care. I'm speaking from the bottom of my heart when I say I couldn't care less about you. Whatever makes you feel proud, whatever makes you feel important, is no business of Kunagisa Tomo's either. So there's only one thing left to say,"

Kunagisa Tomo spoke.

"Give Sacchan back."

"……………"

"**It belongs to me.**"

"……………"

"**I keep my belongings at hand.** At the very least, I can't stomach them being in the possession of someone like you."

"……What a convenient outlook," The professor eked out a rebuttal. He rebuked *Dead Blue*. "You're the one who threw it away, didn't you? What's so wrong about picking up something left behind?"

"It makes no difference. **Discarded or not, it's still mine.** It's unpleasant having someone come along and pick up after you. …You see, professor. *Dead Blue* is awfully greedy. Or do you not even know that much…?"

"…I won't let you have it."

The professor repeated.

Despite being daunted by Kunagisa, despite being visibly shaken by her, he repeated himself.

"Even if you were to prostrate yourself before me, I'd still refuse you. It— It's my one and only advantage over Lady Kunagisa. Even if it's all I have, even if it's something I had to borrow, it's the one thing I have over you. I won't give that up."

"—How boring. So it boils down to envy after all."

"Envy— I can't help it if you see it that way, but don't think so lightly of me. If you knew what I was working on this time— even Kunagisa Tomo would be shaking in her boots."

"Hmph, given the team you've assembled this time, you might even manage something that would take me more than three hours— after all, Sacchan is here."

"…This conversation is over."

Putting some distance between himself and Kunagisa, the professor sat in a chair nearby. "Or perhaps I should say, there's no more room for discussion. There's no reconciliation to be had after such a violent disagreement."

"Now, now, let's not go jumping to conclusions. I'm sorry, I may have gotten a little too emotional." Kunagisa smiled brightly as she raised both her hands, open-palmed. "I apologize. The professor seems quite busy today, so let's have a level-headed conversation tomorrow. I brought all kinds of souvenirs with me as well."

"…I see. Tomorrow." And then, as if he had just remembered something, the professor chuckled. "…I wonder what kind of trump card you have up your sleeve. It'll just amount to wasted effort though. It's as the Lady says— Utsurigi Gaisuke doesn't bend his will to anyone, so it's pointless to try, even if his will was decided for him."

"…You may be right."

"The lodge is deep in the woods. The place may seem a little filthy to Lady Kunagisa, but you'll have to bear with it. We're in the heart of the

mountains after all. Get Shito to show you the way. He's waiting in the first floor lobby, so off with you. I'll see you tomorrow— Lady Kunagisa."

And then, as if to say that he was done talking, he swiveled his chair to face the other direction.

"…Yup, see you tomorrow."

Having said that, Kunagisa stood from her chair and grabbed my hand.

"Let's go Iichan. Shito's on the first floor."

"…Yeah, got it."

I stood as I was told, and being tugged along by Kunagisa, we stepped out of the room, leaving the professor behind.

Kunagisa Tomo and Shadou Kyouichirou—

Their connection had seemed so shallow, and yet it was shockingly turbulent. It wasn't anywhere close to '*couldn't care less.'* No, their connection might have only looked deep from my perspective and perhaps the professor's as well, whereas Kunagisa might have genuinely thought nothing of it. The reality of which probably served as yet another mark on the professor's pride.

Not that I didn't understand.

As much as I didn't want to.

However, unfortunately— and not just for Shadou Kyouichirou, but for Kunagisa Tomo as well— this altercation, it was like they were speaking past one another. Without a doubt, both of them had been arguing, and yet none of the cogs ever clicked into place. It was like a competition between Kamo River and Hiei Mountain. Given the current state of things, I had no expectation that they'd ever reach a compromise.

Age and gender are, themselves, talents—

The professor said some poignant things.

"……I mean,"

Malignant Green, Utsurigi Gaisuke.

The Mad Demon, Shadou Kyouichirou.

Dead Blue, Kunagisa Tomo.

Unbelievable— to borrow the professor's phrasing, the three of them were of unbelievably monstrous intellect.

To be honest, I didn't understand a word the three of them were saying. And it was likely the fact I had given up trying that was the source of the professor's *envy.* That had to be it. Intelligence itself was the tragedy. You end up seeing things you shouldn't. You end up hearing things you shouldn't. You end up knowing things you shouldn't, and you even end up experiencing sensations you shouldn't. That might be fine and dandy for a chef, but…

"…………"

Smart people should all just become chefs.

There we are. Now that's the kind of phrase that could rival the professor's; it's pretty poignant in its own right. I thought it over as I reminisced about the chef on that island.

But as we were walking down the hall—sitting quietly in the smoking room, was Misachi.

"Ah, Misachi-chan!" Kunagisa was the first to call out. "Our talk with the professor is over. You can head on back now."

"—You have my thanks."

Misachi put out her half-smoked (Echo brand) cigarette in the ashtray and stood up. Without a word, she made to walk past us, but then, as if she had just remembered something,

"Oh, about Miss Suzunashi,"

She said.

"I was escorting her around as requested, but— along the way we bumped into Professor Kasugai and Professor Miyoshi, and they seemed to hit it off. They should be conversing in the second floor smoking room as we speak. They're probably still at it, so if you are looking for her, I suggest you start there."

"You have my thanks."

Kunagisa returned the reply.

With that, Misachi made to take off once again, but as she did, "Misachi," I called after her.

"Umm, if it's alright with you, I have a question I'd like to ask."

"—Whatever could it be?"

"What made you decide to work here? What was the reason?"

"…………"

It was the same question I'd asked Shito. In the end Shito had shut me down, saying *someone like you would never understand,* so I was curious how Misachi would respond—

"It's against my principles to have an opinion."

She stated definitively.

"……………"

"If that will be all, then I'll take my leave."

"…Of course. Apologies for keeping you."

Without so much as a smile, Misachi turned in the direction of the

professor’s room and walked off briskly. There was no hesitation in her steps. Perhaps she had already grown accustomed to visitors like us. No doubt, being the secretary of *The Mad Demon* came with its own share of hardships. In that sense, it wouldn’t be odd for us to see eye-to-eye, but given our conversation just now, it was clear we weren’t on the same wavelength.

“Neon-chan’s on the second floor, Iichan."

“…Right. Let’s go then.”

I nodded, trying to look as calm and collected as possible. We made our way past the smoking room and headed towards where the elevator was. I pushed the down button, and then we filed inside.

“Still…see you tomorrow, huh?” I found the silence uncomfortable, so I spoke my mind. “I don’t think that’s gonna be enough. No matter what you say, even if you speak to him tomorrow and the day after as well, unless the geezer suddenly develops dementia, I don’t think you’ll get the results you’re after.”

“Ah…yup. The thing about that is, well, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. I’ll explain it all to you once we get to the lodge. There’s no way to tell who could be listening in around here. It’s also a bit complicated. More importantly, Iichan,” Kunagisa looked at me, “can I hug you?”

“…What’s all this about?”

I forced myself to play along with Kunagisa’s sudden change in mood. “You’ve never asked before. You’ve always just hugged me whenever you wanted to.”

“Umm. I just sorta felt like it.”

“I see. You must’ve seen this in a rom-com, then.”

“Nope.” Kunagisa smiled innocently. “So is it okay? I promise it’ll only be while we’re in the elevator, so please.”

"I don't mind. You need to recharge?"

"Yup." Kunagisa wrapped both arms around my torso.

Then, pressing her entire body into mine, she buried her face in my chest, showing no signs of loosening her grip. Even then, Kunagisa's slender arms didn't hurt me at all.

It didn't hurt.

It didn't hurt.

"…………… "

It had been a truly long time since Kunagisa and I had had a second to ourselves. It made me feel like I could throw it all away just to live in this moment, this irreplaceable moment.

"—Or maybe that's just more nonsense…"

I thought as Kunagisa held me.

What was it that Kunagisa and Utsurigi had talked about? What did two members of *Team* have to say to each other after being reunited after all this time?

I didn't know. I couldn't have known.

I was no genius, but Kunagisa Tomo and Utsurigi Gaisuke were; they could understand each other. They were two geniuses who had fallen into depravity far further and far faster than even Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.

Still—

While I couldn't begin to imagine what sort of conversation Utsurigi and Kunagisa had had, I recalled the entirety of the exchange that had occurred between Utsurigi and me, not just his final question. I hadn't forgotten a single one of Utsurigi's disturbing questions. Every facet, despicable, and every angle, repulsive.

His nonsense-killing questions.

"——……………"

The elevator came to a stop. It seemed we had reached the second floor. And yet Kunagisa made no attempt to let go of me. I didn't say anything, nor did I try to peel her off me. There's no way I'd do something like that. There's no way I'd have been able to.

The open door closed once again, and there, like that, we let a moment pass. A moment for the two of us.

Kunagisa's hands, wrapped around my back. Her arms, around my torso. Her face, against my chest. And looking down, her blue hair.

And—

And within that tiny head of hers, circuits capable of nothing less than perfect beauty, without a byte of waste or bit of redundancy.

A memory as powerful as cutting edge RAM technology— that was how Utsurigi had described it. However, even Utsurigi himself probably realizes that there's something off about that analogy.

The circuits within Kunagisa Tomo, no, *Dead Blue's* brain were not composed of RAM, but ROM. Meaning, that once she's remembered something, there was no way for her to forget it. And so, crammed with as much knowledge as possible, never to be overwritten, she's become an endless ring of information. An infinite set of data, in which the parts and the whole are one in the same.

It's not the ability to remember.

It's the ability not to forget.

There are a fair few people who've likened Kunagisa Tomo *to a machine*, but how many of them had actually believed it to be true? Even as they said it, part of them must have thought *even then, she's still human—*

right? Even with no grounds or basis for that opinion—they simply hoped for it to be true. If not, wouldn't that make them the worst person imaginable?

However, Utsurigi was convinced. The Utsurigi Gaisuke who had compared Kunagisa Tomo to a *device*, *Malignant Green, had* the utmost faith that it was true. It must have been, right? This Nonsense User couldn't say with any certainty, but it must have been, right?

Which means—which means.

It means she hasn't forgotten.

She can't forget. She never forgets.

How she was deceived by me six years ago, what I put her through, how she wound up because of me—she couldn't forget. Even if Kunagisa wanted to forget, she wouldn't have be able to.

How wicked a person I am. How drenched I am in sin.

She doesn't forget.

She remembers.

And yet, she still embraces me like this.

She forgave it all.

Like a mother might a child.

Like an owner, bit by their dog.

Like a benevolent goddess.

She forgave it all.

"—how laughable."

I mumbled comically, but I did not laugh.

Utsurigi asked how it felt to own Kunagisa Tomo.

Professor Kyouichirou asked how it felt to be by her side.

Of course I couldn't answer. I had never once owned Kunagisa Tomo. I had never once been by her side.

In the end, I was in the same position as *Malignant Green, Cheetah, Double-Flick,* and all the other members of *Team*— I was just another one of Kunagisa Tomo's possessions.

The one being owned was me.

The way in which I belonged to her was simply different.

The way in which I belonged to her was far nastier, that's all.

"—………"

How could a belonging walk alongside its owner?

"Okay. Battery's full. Let's go, Iichan."

"Right."

I answered normally.

I think.

"It'd be bad to make Shito wait too long."

"Sure would, hahaha." Kunagisa pressed the *open* button. "But I wonder. Neon-chan was all worried about not getting along with the researchers, so what's she doing chatting with Kokoromi-chan?"

"Who knows?" I gave a brief answer as I stepped out of the elevator. "They must've found something exciting to talk about, right?"

3

“Well y’see, we may call it the ER Program, but it’s still essentially just part of the school system; every year there’s an exam to see if ya get to advance. If ya don’t pass, they force ya to withdraw, if ya catch my drift.”

The woman’s voice was bright and cheerful.

“Hmmm—” Next, was Suzunashi. “Then that means Inoji had to take the exam too.”

“Yeah, yeah, pretty much. If ya wanna know what they were like, lemme tell ya, they were awful. They prepped a hundred questions pulling from each and every subject, but ya only had sixty minutes. You needed sixty points to pass. That might seem simple enough, but there were a hundred questions, and all the way from question one to question one hundred, they weren’t the kind of questions you could crank out in under a minute, ya know.”

“Haha, I see where this is headed,” It was Neo’s old-fashioned, flamboyant tone. “It’s one of those, isn’t it? Given limited time, they have to figure out which questions *they can* answer, right? Which means it’s one of those exams that tests your *observation* and *decision-making* skills. Ha-ha, leave it to the ER Program; that kind of thing would be unthinkable in Japan.”

“You betcha. Basically, sixty points ain’t the minimum ya need to pass. In fact, you might as well call it a *perfect score*. They even mixed in a few nuts ya can’t crack, so it ain’t like the system allows for a hundred points anyhow.”

“That’s one crafty test,” Suzunashi said, “or I guess I should say whichever teacher came up with it must’ve had a pretty rotten personality.”

“Yes ma’am. You’ll get the boot if you don't pass, so including such

S-class questions when the consequence is so severe ain't something I'd ever come up with. Then again, that place was always chock-full of strange professors. Now then, howdya think our *Monk-Ii Talk* did?"

"Here's my theory: he wound up getting full marks anyways," Neo said. "Getting a perfect score on an exam designed not to allow such a thing, he seems like just the kid capable of pulling something like that off."

"No, scoring a zero seems just as likely," Suzunashi added. "He handed in a blank paper as an act of stubborn defiance against the teacher who came up with such a test or something."

"Hehe, not bad. So? Whaddya think, Koutari?"

"I don't know," Koutari gave a curt answer, "but if I had to guess the punchline, he's the kind of guy to solve only the unsolvable questions, then screw up all the rest, right?"

"Ehehe, not quite. Y'all gave me three different answers, and whaddya know, they're all right!" She struck an exaggerated pose, then, *thwack,* she slapped the table. "Neo said it was a test of *observation* and *decision-making*, and he was right, but there was one more thing as well; it was also a test of insight. Here's what that boy did, just like Koutari said, he answered only the hardest question— then he handed it in with the other ninety nine questions still blank."

"No need to act so shocked. After all, that happened to be the *perfect score* that the *test-maker* was after. They decided that **the student who cracked the most difficult question** would advance no matter what. The other questions didn't matter—which means there was never any need to solve them to begin with. If ya solve that question, I reckon you ought to be able to solve the rest. That's why all ya had to do was solve that one question. That guy saw right through it, so instead of wasting effort, he spent all sixty minutes on that single question."

How to produce the greatest results with the least effort.

That was the question they sought answered.

"I see. It's almost like a Zen riddle. That does sound a hell of a lot simpler than finding sixty questions you'd be capable of answering though. I guess that answers how both Koutari and I gave the right answer then— still, insight is one thing, but it'd be nothing if you didn't have the conviction to back it up. You could say the real test was *piecing together the test-maker's feelings*. My-my, quite the boy, isn't he?" Neo said. "—However, that still doesn't account for this beautiful young lady's answer, now does it?"

"No siree. And that's why *Monk-Ii Talk* ain't so easily dealt with." She paused for effect. "Y'see, the answer he was so proud of ended up being dead wrong."

She alone burst into laughter.

She hasn't changed. Not at all. She's the exact same. Not a single solitary thing about her is even the least bit different. During my time in the ER Program, she always tormented and dragged me down like this, and now it seems that Miyoshi Kokoromi— or rather, Ms. Kokoromi was the same as ever.

"Well, in the end, it was only his insight that was being evaluated, so they passed him anyways —ain't no one else with the gumption to pull a stunt like that, I tell you what—"

"—Ms. Kokoromi."

Realizing she was likely to say something unnecessary if left to her own devices, I revealed myself, stepping out of the hallway and heading towards the smoking room. Inside the smoking room, Suzunashi Neon's tall, all-black figure could be seen in the far right corner. In the far left corner Neo Furuara's large body sank heavily into his chair, and next to him, with his long hair obscuring half his body, was Koutari Hinayoshi. Finally, sitting to my right—to my right was Ms. Miyoshi Kokoromi.

Her blonde hair, cut short, and wearing glasses that made you wonder whether the lenses were a tad too big. Draped around her small frame which was dwarfed by Suzunashi's, was an oversized lab coat worn in such a way that her arms didn't even pass through the sleeves. She brought to mind the image of a middle school girl playing doctor. That said, back when she was in middle school, she certainly wasn't **playing**. That's because by the time she was in her final year of elementary, she was already a licensed vivisectionist.

Miyoshi Kokoromi.

Her name, Kokoromi, meant *to view the soul*, however her specialty (along with her interests and hobbies) were the exact opposite; she would dissect the bodies of living beings, dismantle them completely, and study the flesh. Besides her authority in her field, she also once served as part of the program planning department at the mighty research institution, the ER3 System. Because of that, she had been entrusted with the Third Ward at *Mad Demon* Kyouichirou's research facility as number two in his organization.

And— and she also used to be my teacher.

Of course, that's only if you buy into the idea that anyone who's ever taught you anything is worthy of the title.

"Hehe—"

Ms. Kokoromi, in a fashion unbefitting of someone already twenty eight years of age, flashed me a smile more suited to a spoiled child. No, it had already been three years, so she was already in her thirties. However, with her face free of any and all cosmetics, it resembled that of a little girl.

"Howdy, *Monk-Ii Talk*. Talk about an unexpected reunion." She flashed me the peace-sign. "Now, now, what's with that hangdog look of yours? How've ya been? You been taking care of yourself, kid?"

"I was fine until a moment ago. Much better than I am now at least. Yes— what a truly unexpected reunion, Miss," I answered, but I felt my eyes constantly trying to avoid looking directly at her. "The same to you. You look

fit as a fiddle, the same as ever, which means you're –how should I say this?– truly, from the bottom of my heart……… the absolute worst."

While on our way here, I had heard all about the place Utsurigi was being held captive, *Mad Demon* Kyouichirou's research facility, but somewhere within Chee-kun's information, *Miyoshi Kokoromi's* name popped up. The worry that I had been carrying with me ever since had just come to fruition. My fleeting hope that perhaps it was just someone with the same name had finally withered away.

"I was just telling Suzunashi here all about your daring exploits, what a hilarious life you've led, how you're such a funny guy, and the like. And wouldn't ya know– I heard something interesting–" Ms. Kokoromi stood up from the couch, and, still holding a cigarette between her lips, she spoke.

"So ya dropped out of the program, huh? What a stupid thing to do. Is that skull of yours empty?"

"…Didn't you drop out of the program as well? That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"Woah now, ya make it sound like ya don't want me here." She slung her arm round my shoulders in an overly-familiar manner. "But I didn't quit on my own, y'see. They sacked me."

"I didn't think it was possible to lose your job there and walk away with your life…"

Then again, this woman-

She was the kind of person who could twist the impossible into the possible.

"Well, now that I think about it, I might've given up something just as dear. Listen 'ere, I heard something through the grapevine about one of the System's heads, *The Seven Fools.* I reckon one of them died or something, 'cause it seems there's an opening. If I was still part of the system, I might've wound up their successor."

“Not a chance. There’s far too many candidates.” I tried to feign composure as I continued the small talk. “I heard something about that though. If I remember correctly, they’ve already decided it’ll be another Japanese person. His name was *Saitou* or something…… it was a pretty odd name.”

“I’m just yankin’ your chain. Y’ain’t in the habit taking things seriously, but you can’t handle a joke either, huh? There ain’t no way a plain Jane like myself would ever wind up as one of the seven fools,” she said before chuckling to herself and slapping my shoulder. “Bless your heart, you haven’t changed either.”

“……………”

“But still, I mean— it was quite surprising.” I was still being wrangled by Ms. Kokoromi when Neo called out to me in a cheerful voice. “I always knew there was something different about you, but who’d have thought you’d be an exchange student from the ER Program? Right, Koutari? I called it, didn’t I?”

“No.”

Koutari’s reply was cold. He folded his arms across his chest in a way that said, *I’m only here because I was dragged along. I want to get back to my own ward as soon as possible.* He was extremely blunt and unsociable, and yet, for some reason, he was the one I held the most affinity for.

“Not very friendly, are you? Anyways, you shouldn’t say anything about that to Shito. He wanted to take part in the program but couldn’t, you see. Or did the professor not let him?” Neo continued, smirking. “Still, tell me. Why did you really drop out of the ER Program? The ER3 System’s like a symbol that all us academics strive for.”

“……………”

The ER3 System.

It was a privately run research institute situated in Houston Texas,

America. In other words, it occupied the same niche as *Mad Demon* Kyouichirou's research facility. However, the scale could not be more different. No offense to Professor Kyouichirou, but by comparison, this research facility in the boonies may as well not even exist. Like the British Museum, they pilfer academic experts from all over the world like an overzealous collector, and then they spend day and night striving to reach the pinnacle of human understanding; it's like a *cult of science*, and an exceptionally fanatic one at that— that is what the ER3 System is.

And the system responsible for nurturing the young up-and-comers who came to such an exceptional research institution was called the ER Program. To avoid any misunderstanding, let me state it plainly, it was like a **school affiliated with the institute**. I will avoid a full detailing of events, but I participated in the program since my second year of middle school, and sometime around the beginning of this year, I dropped out and made my way back to Japan. That leads us to the present, but during the first two of my five year sojourn in America, I studied directly under this perverted vivisection freak, Miyoshi Kokoromi.

I'm being completely honest when I say I'd rather avoid the topic of her personality or past. After all, harken back to that lecture she gave Suzunashi and the others about my daring exploits; the teacher who came up with such a twisted exam was none other than Ms. Kokoromi herself. That ought to be more than enough explanation as to what kind of person she is.

And so, when I heard that Ms. Kokoromi would be withdrawing from the System and heading back to Japan, I cried out with joy. That night, the other students **bound** under her tutelage and I reserved a room at the facility and threw a huge party. I'm not fond of such revelry, so I always turned those kinds of invitations down, but on this occasion and this occasion alone, I let myself go along with it. I didn't just show up either; in celebration of Ms. Kokoromi's departure, I ended up chugging an entire bottle of vodka.

During my stint at the hospital with acute alcohol poisoning, Ms. Kokoromi visited me bearing a disastrous premonition. "I reckon we'll be meeting again. When that time comes, let's continue to be friends." Despite

not having broken any bones, I was covered head-to-toe with graffiti drawn in permanent marker (I'm sure you can guess who the culprit was), and that was how she left me. She walked out of my hospital room and left the country.

And just now, her premonition had come to pass.

"Ah well, I may have said it at the time, but I didn't figure I'd actually see ya again. Your teach is over the moon! I'm so touched!"

"Yes, I'm moved to tears."

The last half of that sentence was true. My old wounds started to ache, and I honestly felt like I was about to cry. Shaking off Ms. Kokoromi's arm, I turned to Suzunashi. "Alright, let's get going," I said.

"Shito's probably sick of waiting for us downstairs. If we don't hurry up he's gonna stop playing along with our jokes."

"Right," she nodded as she stood, bringing her full height to bare. "In that case, Miyoshi, thank you for such stimulating conversation. It's been very enlightening."

"Not at all, if ya like whatcha heard, I've got plenty more for ya. I'm usually in the Third Ward, so if ya need me for anything while you're here, come give me a holler." Ms. Kokoromi wore a generous smile. "That goes for you too, if you wanna chat with your teach like the good ol' days, swing by whenever."

"That won't be necessary," I answered immediately. "After all, you must be so busy with work."

"*Work*, huh…?" She responded with a thin smile. This smile. This is the smile she would make as she pondered where to make the first incision.

"But ya see, if we start calling **this** work, don'tcha think livin' would be a little too easy? Hm?"

"…………"

“Well, I’m sure we’ve got plenty of things to catch up on, but let’s wait ‘till we’re on our own before we really sink our teeth into it.”

“Things to catch up on? You and I have nothing of the sort.” I borrowed Kunagisa’s words and turned them on Ms. Kokoromi. “I can’t think of a single thing that I’d want to ask you.”

“How lonesome. If only that were true.”

Without blinking an eye, she just smiled cheerfully.

“Well then, how about we get going as well, Koutari? We don’t want to get chewed out by the professor again, do we?”

“The only one getting chewed out will be you.”

Neo made his insistence, and Koutari gave his short reply. The two of them stepped out of the smoking room and passed me by. Neo, offering everyone a polite bow, and Koutari, offering a cold shoulder. The two could not be any more different, and yet it didn’t seem like they were especially close, nor were they on particularly bad terms.

That’s when I remembered Utsurigi’s words.

“Say, Koutari.”

“…What?” He turned back around, sounding particularly annoyed. “You want something?”

“You should cut your hair.”

“…………………”

Koutari reacted as if I had just spoken some secret code, then after a moment of silence, “none of your business,” he chose to cut me off instead of the hair. Then, with Neo by his side, he made his way towards the elevator.

“Righty then, I’m off too. I’ve left Kasugai waiting long enough.”

Kasugai—I see. Come to think of it, Misachi said something along the lines of, *Miss Suzunashi should be conversing with Professor Miyoshi and Professor Kasugai*, but when I got here, it was just Ms. Kokoromi. Assuming the odd couple just happened to be passing by and joined in later, then where did Kasugai go?

My doubts must have shown on my face.

"Kasugai said, *I'm sick of hearing you talk about this pointless kid* and went back to the Third Ward early,"

Ms. Kokoromi explained.

Sure, I might not know her face, but judging by her reaction, Kasugai seemed like a relatively normal person. I had no way of knowing whether it was actually true, but I'd just have to hope that it was.

"Alright, how's about we chat over drinks next time? 'Till then, have a good one!"

With that, Ms. Kokoromi took her leave. The only ones left in the smoking room were Suzunashi and me. When nothing remained of Suzunashi's cigarette but the filter, she finally put it out before turning to me. "So, Inoji,"

"—any problems with Mr. Utsurigi?"

"—I won't pretend there wasn't, but for the most part, it probably went how you're imagining it. Nothing major."

"I see," Suzunashi nodded. "Then that's cause for celebration. Good, good. Well then, I've just about had my fill of this place too. Misachi's standoffishness certainly threw me for a loop though."

"You can't call something like that standoffishness, you'll make standoffishness cry. How'd it go by the way? What'd your investigation into *The Mad Demon* tell you?"

“How’d it go? —I still have no clue what’s going on, but being clueless is part of the fun. It’s like I’m walking around in a foreign country. Say, Inoji,” Suzunashi said,

“Is it true…? Are Blue and Mr. Utsurigi’s brains really that much better than Professor Shadou Kyouichirou’s? After looking around a little, I find that a little hard to believe.”

“You shouldn’t judge people by the front they put up— although I guess I’m preaching to the choir.” I shrugged my shoulders. “Who knows? That kind of thing is extremely vague. You can’t just assign a numeric value to someone’s intelligence— and I’m not still talking about that exam earlier.”

“…If I had to say what the problem is, it might be a generational difference,”

Suzunashi mumbled with a strange kind of confidence.

Shadou Kyouichirou——sixty-three years old.

Utsurigi Gaisuke——thirty-five years old.

And Kunagisa Tomo——nineteen years old.

Comparing the lot of them in their prime would be pointless. After all, the three of them had lived in three entirely different eras. Not only has that, in Kunagisa Tomo’s case, conventional wisdom suggested we account for future growth.

Whether growth was something she was capable of was a different problem altogether.

“Don’t you think that a generational gap is more decisive than talent, Inoji?” Suzunashi continued. “I mean— just look at the periods the three of them lived through. Between the professor, Mr. Utsurigi, and Blue, Blue’s clearly the most privileged. The tools and the routes were already laid out for her, weren’t they? It’s the same idea as playing your hand last in rock paper scissors; you’re bound to win.”

Those who blaze a trail, and those who simply follow it. Which is easier? Which produces more results? It went without saying. No matter the circumstance, those with a late start would eventually overtake those in the lead— it was certainly a persuasive argument.

However,

“I don’t think it’s that simple…” Having spoken to the two of them myself, I couldn’t bring myself to think that way. It may have had some truth to it, but it wasn’t the whole truth. “…ordinary people like us couldn’t even hope to understand the kinds of problems those three face. It’s best not to think about it too much. For your own sake.”

“Maybe you’re right. Speaking of Blue, where is she? I don’t see her. You’re not hiding her in your pocket, are you?”

“Ah… I sent her on ahead. I thought it would be bad to make Shito wait any longer.”

“Hmph, you sent her on ahead, huh?” She spoke meaningfully. “…In other words, you’re so desperate to keep your past from her that you’d go as far as leaving your precious, precious Blue in Shito’s hands.”

“What are you talking about, Suzunashi?” I responded lightheartedly as I began walking. “Kunagisa knows all about my participation in the ER Program, not to mention my involvement with the ER3 System. It was her brother’s recommendation that got me into the Program in the first place, of course she’d know, right?”

“But you’ve been keeping quiet about **what you did** over there.”

There was accusation in her voice. It stopped me in my tracks.

“…Did Ms. Kokoromi tell you something?”

“If only… If she had, it would’ve made this conversation much simpler.” Suzunashi stood right next to me. Without looking my way, she stared straight ahead. “Unfortunately, the only thing I got to hear was idle

gossip. That woman knew what she was doing. She seems easygoing, but she was always avoiding anything serious. If anything, that personality of hers feels like something she pulled out of thin air. That's one hell of a teacher you've got, Inoji."

"Thank you kindly," I forced myself to play the fool, "I'm ever humbled by your praise."

"It wasn't a compliment. She didn't tell me anything. But still, there's something you don't want heard, isn't there, Inoji? Not by Blue, and if possible, not by me either. The fact you've been keeping your relationship with Ms. Kokoromi close to your chest is proof."

"Oh, please. I just forgot to mention it. That proves nothing."

"…You know, some people may find being secretive about their past and only dealing in hints cool, but as far as I'm concerned, it's downright stupid."

"I'm not doing it to be cool."

"Yeah, I bet. That's why I'm gonna leave it be. I understand how you feel, and I'm not saying that you have to bare everything about yourself to Blue either. Everyone, be it you, me, or even Asano, we're all bursting with the kind of secrets we don't want other people to know. You're not special. You're not special at all. So please,"

Suzunashi took one step ahead of me,

"Stop betraying what you hold dear."

"………………"

Betray. Betrayal.

"…Suzunashi."

"That's enough lecturing for now. Let's leave the rest for some other time." Suzunashi turned around and rapped me on the skull. "Alright then,

let’s hurry up and get downstairs. Shito and Blue must be absolutely sick of waiting.”

“……Right.”

I nodded slowly.

Once again we began walking. All the while I thought about how glad I was to have Suzunashi with us this time around.

We took the elevator to the first floor. As soon as they caught sight of us, Shito yelled out.

“What the hell took you so long!? Did you ride all the way back on a tortoise? Don’t make me out to be the hare, dumbass! You think I like sitting around!?”

“Yeah, Iichan.” This was the first time Kunagisa ever agreed with Shito. “You’re so slow. I’m all worn out just waiting.”

“My bad,” I gave a short apology. “So Shito, where’s this lodge?”

“Uwah, this bastard keeps us waiting for how long!? And that’s all the apology he can muster!?” He sighed. “Listen, I haven’t actually been there myself. I just show people the way whenever we have guests. It’s pretty deep in the woods. Near the wall. We call it the *Haunted Manor* among ourselves,” Shito said ominously before tossing me a set of keys. “Here, for the rooms. We prepared three, so use them however you like.”

“Thanks. In that case, I’ll be showered and waiting for you.”

“Got it, I’ll head right over as soon as I’m done with my work, so why don’t you get ready for me by— as if! Who the hell do you think I am!?” Shito yelled. “Cut it the hell out! I’m not here to be the butt of your jokes! I’ll kill you!”

“That wasn’t very nice Iichan…”

“…gross.”

Their cold gazes washed over me, all three of them.

I try to brighten the mood, and this is how they treat me?

"—god, what a hopeless idiot… Alright fine, let's go."

Following the usual procedures, Shito opened the entrance to the research ward and led us across the brick-paved courtyard deeper into the facility. It was in the opposite direction of the entrance we had come in from, and it took us even further from the Seventh Ward where Utsurigi resided.

Drip.

A drop of water grazed the tip of my nose. I looked up, and it was like the sky was ready to burst into tears at any moment. Within the next few hours, we'd likely experience a downpour. I don't know why, but I found myself thinking about a certain Human Failure and how he might describe it. *A gloom that cut through the heavens like people through people, like skies across skies, like raindrops through raindrops.*

DAY ONE (4) - A FAINT SMILE AND STRIKE BY NIGHT

KASUGAI KASUGA Researcher

0

A tragedy is not when an incident occurs.

When nothing occurs, that's the real tragedy.

1

When Professor Shadou Kyouichirou had claimed *it might seem a little filthy,* or when his assistant Ougaki Shito referred to it as a *haunted manor*, neither of the two had been, in any way, exaggerating. If anything, they were being overly modest.

Rather than *lodge*, the term *derelict* struck me as a far more apt description. It didn't seem to have been renovated since its construction, almost as if it was built for the express purpose of documenting the way concrete weathers over time. Not to mention, the building sat in the depths of the forest, so fear and apprehension was the natural response. I'd be more surprised if a lodge like this didn't house some kind of ghost.

Then again, my current company consisted of Suzunashi Neon and Kunagisa Tomo, and to their credit, neither of them looked perturbed in the slightest. In fact, they seemed almost beside themselves with excitement. "Now that's more like it. I should take a picture for Asano, she'd love it," Suzunashi spouted cool lines one after the other, but she was so eager to get inside that she pulled me along by the sleeve. The sight seemed to genuinely unnerve Shito.

This derelict… rather, this lodge was three stories tall. Our lodgings were on the second floor, the doors to which lay in a row right next to the floor's landing. Kunagisa took the first door, Suzunashi, the second, and I got the third. Given how the building looked from outside, I didn't have much hope for the interior, but the inside was relatively normal. Of course, that's

only compared to the outside; a relative judgement is, after all, relative. If we had brought that clean-freak maid with us, then the usual stress that she keeps bottled away would certainly begin to radiate through her skin. Those kinds of thoughts flitted through my head.

After finishing a late dinner we took turns in the bath washing off the day's troubles (The order was Suzunashi → Kunagisa → Me. By the time I got in, there was barely any hot water left. All because Kunagisa put up a fight), and so it was just after midnight when we all had the chance to gather in Kunagisa's room.

Kunagisa was rolling around in her bed, Suzunashi was slumped against the wall nearly dozing off, and I stood with my back to the door, giving serious thought as to why Suzunashi's choice of nightwear was a Mandarin gown.

"Uhhh- Uhhhh Uhhhh Uhhhhhh."

I'd lost count of how many times Kunagisa groaned.

"Still, what am I to do?"

"*What am I to do*? —Are you still talking about Utsurigi?"

The topic had come up many times during dinner, and even while Suzunashi was in the bath. That said, while it had come up, we evidently never came up with a solution. It wasn't the kind of thing that could be solved. And so, my argument remained unchanged.

"There's nothing to be done, right?"

I said.

"It'd be one thing if our only obstacle was Professor Kyouichirou—but if Utsurigi himself doesn't want to leave, we can't just drag him out, can we?"

"You're right— that's why I'm stumped. Ahh jeez, being stumped

sucks."

"…………"

Apparently this is what Utsurigi said to Kunagisa:

"It's true, I agree with Professor Kyouichirou. If I compare it to when you were our leader, or if I think about how I used to be surrounded by comrades like Cheetah and Double-Flick, this place almost seems like a dump," he said,

"*But just because you and the others possess inordinate talent, it doesn't mean I can just discount all the work being done here. Professor Kyouichirou takes my ideas and expands on them. Isn't that good enough? It's a given that two heads are better than one, after all."*

What a model answer.

Too much so.

It reeked of insincerity.

"Sacchan isn't the kind of person who'd say something like that—they've gotta be hiding something big," Kunagisa said, rolling onto her side. "I'm not sure what, but Sacchan's hiding something."

"Hiding something, huh? That must be why Professor Kyouichirou seemed so confident, why he seemed so unshakeable," I added. "Still, whether they're hiding something or not, Utsurigi has no intention of leaving that ward under any circumstance, right? Say we pull off a miracle and force Utsurigi to concede, we'd still have to convince the professor, wouldn't we? And given how our last conversation went, that doesn't seem very likely. He fits the term *crotchety old man* to a T, so forget unlikely, it'd be downright impossible. Contending with one impossibility would be tough enough, but two? It's hopeless."

"Two impossibilities, huh…? Well, as far as Professor Kyouichirou goes— that sounds about right. But we shouldn't count Sacchan out quite yet,

I came prepared for just such an occasion. I didn't expect him to still hold a grudge though. He can be so stubborn sometimes."

Kunagisa squirmed her way across the bed. I say that, but she was in a supine position the entire time, so it was actually quite creepy. I'd never seen someone cover so much ground crawling around on their back.

Kunagisa rummaged through her belongings before fishing out a case containing a round disk which she tossed my way. I caught it in my right hand. That being said, since I was not, in fact, a CD drive, I couldn't determine its contents by that alone. "What's this?" I asked.

"Given my cursory knowledge of electrical engineering as a former ER Program participant, it appears to be some kind of circular disc."

"Well yeah… but if you couldn't figure out that much, it'd be more than a little concerning."

"A CD-ROM, huh? Hmm… so its contents must be the *souvenir* you had in store for the professor."

In other words, this was Kunagisa's *wild card*.

"Technically it's not a CD-ROM, but well, exactly. Egg-zact-lee!"

Kunagisa patted her hands together. I guess she wanted it back. I frisbee-tossed it back to her, but Kunagisa didn't make any attempt to catch it. Instead, taking it straight to the face.

"…………"

"…………"

"…………"

"…………"

"Owch."

What did you expect?

"So your plan is to trade the contents of that disk for Utsurigi Gaisuke's return? The professor didn't strike me as the kind of sucker who'd accept seven hundred megabytes of data in exchange for all the knowledge held by a former *Team* or *Cluster* member like Utsurigi Gaisuke, you know."

"It's not about quantity, Iichan. It's about quality. If you let yourself get fooled by big numbers, you're in for a rough time. Forget seven hundred megabytes, there's a technician out there that wields such skill that **They** were able to plunge the world into earth-shaking darkness with a measly sixteen byte program."

"What are you on about? Are we still talking about *Malignant Green*?"

"—Sacchan would never do something so vile. Sacchan knew his limits— he didn't always stick to them, but at least he knew. But it's like **They** never even bothered to learn. Someone like that couldn't be a part of *Team*. If anything, **They** were like the antithesis of everything we believed."

For a moment, the calm left Kunagisa's expression. Just like when she was facing down Utsurigi Gaisuke, just like when she was confronting Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.

"**They** weren't just some hacker, or cracker, or anything trivial like that. —Listen, Iichan. They're still out there. An inhuman who, on a whim, for no reason at all, without giving it much thought and with only the slightest amount of effort, would crush the world under their heel. An inhuman monster against which the logic, theory, tactics, and strategy employed by humanity would be futile. **They are** the one person who far and away surpassed *Cluster* —no, **They were**. **They** went by *Desert Fox*—"

I felt as though a cold breeze had swept through the room. However, before I could realize that it was just my imagination, "well, putting such an exceptional case aside," Kunagisa had regained her prior carefree demeanour. She picked up the case. "Still, Iichan's worry was pointless anyway. Quality's

a given, but this disc is bursting with quantity as well. This is what they call a C3D; it boasts up to one hundred and forty gigs of storage. It's not on the market for practical use quite yet… but I suppose it's only a matter of time. For your information, this thing's stuffed to the brim; it couldn't eat another byte. I even included some stuff I got from Chee-kun and Acchan."

"So this is the *strange project* that you holed yourself up in your room over?" I nodded. "I see… a *wildcard*, huh? That's certainly something. In that case it might actually be worth trading the mind of a genius for it."

After all, it took three former *Team*-mates to whip together such an extraordinary piece of technology. To my undiscerning eye, it didn't look like much, but to someone who understood such things, take someone from this IT and mathematics specialized research facility for example, they would find *information* worth tossing aside anything for. And in such unprecedented proportions, a whole hundred and forty gigabytes. In that case, even the steadfast Professor Kyouichirou might—

"—Then what's all the fuss about? With something like this, your first problem's as good as solved, isn't it?"

"Yup. But you could probably guess by our talk with the professor— I think I touched on it while we were on our way to see Sacchan, didn't I? — the professor's really taking this seriously."

"Now that you mention it, you did say something about that." Something about his nature as a scholar or his lot in life. As I tried to remember, I continued.

"And?"

"Well, that's just it. That's the problem," Kunagisa said with a sigh. "I was careless, too careless— there's no point in saying this now, but I felt like something was off from the start. Why Shadou Kyouichirou of all people —? Listen, I'm not being sarcastic or anything. Forget what I said when I was twelve, I genuinely think the professor's working on something incredible this time— So why is Shadou Kyouichirou of all people poaching Sacchan's

smarts? I've been wondering that since the beginning. The professor's genius enough without all that, and he was never one for fame or status."

"But isn't Utsurigi's **genius** on a higher level than the professor's?"

"It's not a matter of higher or lower. Genius isn't something that you can fit into **levels** anyways. Besides, I'm sure you've picked up on it from our *conversation* earlier— that man's awfully proud. You get what I'm saying, don't you?"

"I do…" In fact, I think the man's pride is already well beyond awful. "…but what of it?"

"Prideful people have all kinds of problems, but this is one thing you can trust them on."

"Hmmm, I can't argue with that, but…"

Certainly, someone looking for fame and status wouldn't shut themselves away in the very heart of the mountains like this. And that's not just the case for the professor. I can say the same for the other researchers as well.

"In that case, why is Professor Kyouichirou so fixated on Utsurigi…?"

Perhaps all that plagiarism is nothing more than a front. What on earth could the professor be working on that's worth tarnishing his good name like that?

"He was still kinda cute when he was researching artificial intelligence and artificial life, but now… I get it. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, that thing's a *Mad Demon*. No matter how you put it, no human could come up with something like that. He's rotten to the core." Kunagisa sat up abruptly and turned to face me. "First thing's first, Iichan, what do you think a *Demon* is?"

"……? A demon, like in the biblical sense?"

"Sure, that too. That's one way of looking at it. It certainly comes across that way. But in the world of cryptography, where the professor lives, it holds a different meaning. You see, a *Demon* is a **process** that carefully watches and waits for **certain conditions** to appear. It waits and waits until finally, when the time is right, it executes its function with smooth precision. …perhaps, ever since we met— no, even before that, the professor has been lying in wait. So *The Mad Demon* actually refers to that kind of *rogue process*, huh? Not a bad way to put it. Even Sacchan's psycho logic would be better than something like this."

"…………"

Kunagisa's words carried a considerable amount of weight, but I didn't understand a single thing that was said to me. This might have been another case of us speaking past one another. The gravity of the situation was entirely lost on me. What on earth was she so frightened of? I couldn't begin to understand. But one thing was absolutely clear to me. The situation we were in had taken a turn for the worse.

"You still don't get it? Basically, it's like this," Kunagisa said. "The chance he's been waiting for, the chance he's waited sixty three years for, his golden opportunity, I doubt he'd give it up for a disc or two."

"Are you saying that whatever the professor's working on is more valuable than the contents of a disk put together by *Team*?"

"Not at all. If we're talking about value, I guarantee this disk blows it out of the water. A hundred out of a hundred people would agree with me, and it'd be the same even if we raised it to a thousand. That said, the difference between objective value and relative value is immeasurable. To borrow a page from the professor, this is the research a scientist poured his whole life into— it's his life's work. We're talking about something irreplaceable here, there's no way he'd just trade it away, right? Assuming he's not particularly concerned with things like right and wrong or ethics, that is."

"Really? I'm not sure I agree," I voiced my doubt. "I have a tough time picturing an academic saying something so romantic. After all,

academia’s a matter of careful consideration and calculation, isn’t it?”

“Really, Inoji, you say some wild things. Academics and romantics are one in the same, aren’t they?”

Suzunashi, who I thought was half asleep, suddenly broke her silence, butting into our conversation.

“Only a romanticist would whip up a stupid idea like trying to fly a rocket to the moon, right? And getting full marks on a test is also nothing more than a boy's romantic dream, isn’t it?”

“Romance…?”

Maybe Suzunashi was right. Thinking back to a certain academic I met this April, I gave a tentative nod. Then again, I couldn’t imagine a geezer like Shadou Kyouichirou being so simple. He was about as far from reasonable as you could get, a thoroughly detestable man. And that’s coming from me, so it had to be true.

“You know, as an outsider, it’s not my place to butt-in, so I’ve been doing my best to keep quiet, but I just can’t help myself. Inoji, Blue, this conversation is messed up,” Suzunashi continued. “Inoji, let’s start with you. You mentioned *forcing him to concede* earlier, but that’s not something you should be deciding by yourself, is it? Why are you the one deciding what Mr. Utsurigi should give up?”

“No, that was- it was just for the sake of argument.”

“Ha. For the sake of argument, huh? What a convenient expression.” Suzunashi flashed a sardonic smile. “Next, Blue.”

“Hmm?” Kunagisa craned her head to look at Suzunashi. “Did I say something weird?”

“Something weird…? No, what’s weird is that I’d have to say something like this to a girl as smart as you in the first place, but here it is.” Suzunashi paused for a moment. “Listen up, Blue. If Mr. Utsurigi says he

doesn’t want to leave, isn’t that good enough? He says he’s fine, so why are you so intent on forcing him to go with you? If you think you’re *saving him*, then I suggest you think again. If Mr. Utsurigi wants to be here, then anything more than that is just needless meddling.”

“But Suzunashi,” unconsciously, my mouth moved on its own. “According to Chee-kun, Professor Kyouichirou’s got… **something** held over Utsurigi’s head, and given how our last conversation went, I’ve no doubt that it’s true. That’s the reason Utsurigi can't leave. Even before he was physically confined within the Seventh Ward, he was already bound hand and foot by invisible chains. In that case— can you really say he’s here on his own volition?”

“I can. Did Mr. Utsurigi ask you to *help him*, did he even hint at it? If he did, then fine. I’d even lend a hand. Not to rip-off Asano or anything, but to know the right course of action and not do it shows a lack of courage— Anyone would help.”

Suzunashi’s gaze pierced right through us.

“But right now you two are in the wrong. You’ve got it completely and utterly backwards. You’re as far from right as you can get. This…what was it? Chee-kun? You hear all about Mr. Utsurigi’s *plight* from this Chee-kun, then working with Acchan, you put together these *countermeasures*, and finally make your way to Shadou Kyouichirou’s research facility. So tell me, Inoji, when exactly did Mr. Utsurigi’s wishes ever come into the equation? Or perhaps Blue thinks that, just because she used to be his friend, she somehow knows exactly what he’s thinking?”

“…………”

“Suzunashi, that’s going too far.”

Noticing Kunagisa’s silence, I turned to face Suzunashi. However, paying it no mind, “I haven’t gone far enough,” she said.

“This isn’t nearly far enough,” and this time Suzunashi focused her

gaze solely on me. “You’re not making him *concede*— I’d say you’re asking him to *submit*.”

She was dead serious, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Say that Mr. Utsurigi truly wanted to get out of here. He actually wants to leave, but for some reason or other, he can’t. Say we arbitrarily decided that such a self-serving thing was true. And yet, he brushes his own wishes aside and continues to stay here of his own volition— or should I say *stay confined* here? I think we ought to respect his decision.”

“Respect…?”

“Yes, respect. He’s a grown man willing to **throw away** his own life and career in order to stay here, right? He’s content to side with a man far less talented than him, isn’t he? Isn’t that enough? There’s no need for you to butt-in. You seem to be confused about something, so let me set you straight. Mr. Utsurigi isn’t a child. If anything, it’s the two of you, who’ve barely lived half as long as he has-”

Suzunashi. She pointed at each of us in turn,

“-who are the children here.”

Children.

That’s right.

If it hadn’t been pointed out to me like this, I would have forgotten, but in reality, Kunagisa, with her girlish appearance, and I were clearly still just kids. Children of nineteen years with three or four months’ change.

“——yeah.”

After a moment, Kunagisa nodded. I’d never seen her wear such a meek expression.

“Neon-chan’s right. I really think so. You see- if that’s all it was, if Sacchan was honestly okay with everything, not even I would think to

interfere."

"Huh?" Suzunashi's eyes widened. "What do you mean by that?"

"It means Sacchan hiding something would be perfectly fine on its own. I don't wanna meddle with Sacchan's business any more than I have to. I recognize that he's got a will of his own. But you see, Neon-chan, the problem this time around is actually with Professor Shadou Kyouichirou. It has to do with *The Mad Demon,* Shadou Kyouichirou's goal."

"…What're you saying?" This time I was the one who asked. "Sure, the professor seems like a problematic guy, but… *goal?* Is he planning something?"

"I mean— don't you think it's a little odd, Iichan? This is such a huge facility, so why are there only six researchers? Even if you include their assistant, Shito-chan, that still only makes seven. When I went to the Hokkaido facility with Nao-kun there were at least thirty staff members."

"Well yeah, I thought it was pretty bizarre— but isn't that just a case of quality over quantity?"

Academic research like this differs from sports and the like in the sense that more people didn't always mean better results. In fact, the more people involved the more muddied and unclear the thought process became. The difference in individual athletic ability is certainly large in its own right, but when it comes to the gulf in brainpower between those at the top and those at the bottom, there may as well be no difference at all.

"Yup, exactly. But, Iichan, wouldn't only picking the cream of the crop also be the best way to maintain confidentiality?"

"Look, it's not like I don't understand what you're saying… but isn't a facility like this already more than equipped to maintain confidentiality or whatever? There's no need for them to limit the amount of people working here on top of that."

"Looking at it the other way, doesn't that just mean that the

professor’s doing something that requires that level of secrecy?”

“…Something tells me you have an idea what that might be.”

“Yup. I do actually, but…”

Kunagisa paused for but a moment.

“But, if I wasn’t trying to piece everything together, I would’ve never thought of something like this. Still, if you take this facility, its location, along with the staff who work here— Koutari Hinayoshi, Neo Furuara, Miyoshi Kokoromi, and Kasugai Kasuga— and add that to the information we already know from Chee-kun— it spits out a result that’s probably close enough.”

“……………”

“The reason Sacchan– Utsurigi Gaisuke’s locked up here isn’t so they can perform research together— it’s not to plagiarise his work either. Professor Kyouichirou isn’t **using Sacchan as a researcher** at all.”

“He’s… not?”

“*He can’t do it himself, so he’s getting Sacchan to do it for him*— we’ve been under that horrible misconception from the start. There’s no way the professor would do something like that. Iichan, what Professor Shadou Kyouichirou’s been so secretive about is this-”

Kunagisa looked at me,

As if she were clinging on for dear life.

“Malignant Green, Utsurigi Gaisuke’s body is being used as a **guinea pig**— to create the *Ultimate Human Dogma.”*

2

Time for Some Philosophy: Act Two

According to Ms. Kokoromi, the most powerful organisms on Earth are, without a doubt, bacteria; apparently, it's considered common knowledge among biologists. This was because bacteria could be found anywhere, and they possessed an inordinate ability to self-propagate. If we consider the reproductive capabilities of bacteria as 'one,' then even a layman would recognize humanity's as 'one in a hundred trillion.' A number as mathematically significant as zero. In other words, in the face of bacteria, humanity may as well not exist.

That said, bacteria does not possess intelligence. I've never been a bacterium myself, so I can't say that with certainty, but it's probably safe to make the assumption. So, thinking about it like that, people wound up believing something along the lines of *humans have some form of intelligence. Therefore we ought to consider humans superior to bacteria. After all, have you ever seen bacteria using a computer or surfing the web?* And I suppose they're right. Human wisdom gave birth to culture and civilization, and regardless of whether you believe that's a good or bad thing- **no, acknowledging it as both a good and bad thing**- you can still be forgiven for the tentative belief that it must have counted for something.

However, wouldn't that lead you to the same paradoxical argument proposed by the law of conservation of energy? Take me for example. Say I wanted to use C to code an application. First I'd go to the bookstore and pick out a technical book on C- no, I'd start with a beginners guide- I'd read it thoroughly, boot up my PC, then clumsily pluck at the keys until the application was complete. In contrast, how would an *Ex-Team Member* and top of the line hacker like Kunagisa Tomo or Utsurigi Gaisuke do it? Simple. They would **simply** make the application. With no thought spared as to what might be best or how they ought to go about it. Much like riding a bike,

there’s no trick to it. That’s just how those veterans do things. Without even needing to think. After all, the reason why good memory doesn’t always equate to genius is because of unwritten rules like that. For them, there was no need to remember a thing.

And yet, no matter how superior they might have been, the things that we accomplished remained the same.

Humanity, which gave rise to civilization, culture, science, and technology all in order to live, and bacteria, which simply lived, in the end, I guess they each had their merits. Of course, I say this with no intention of paying reverence to even the most microscopic of organisms, nor with any intent to look scornfully upon all of creation. What I’m asking about is not intelligence itself, but its purpose. If even after reaching the summit, you find yourself in the same place, doing the exact same things, what left is there to hope for?

“That’s best said by someone who’s actually reached the summit. Even sour grapes are wasted on an idiot like me. Philosophy over,”

I muttered then opened my eyes.

It was a little past one in the morning. The location was Shadou Kyouichirou’s research facility courtyard— a brick paved area fenced in by research wards on all sides— I stood alone. After our conversation, I left Kunagisa’s room and returned to my own. I laid in bed for a while, but I found myself strangely lucid— there was far too much to think about— I couldn’t sleep, so I quietly stole away from the lodge, and my legs had carried me all the way here.

It wasn’t raining yet. The rain clouds that had kept me in suspense all this time had yet to burst. During the day, the temperature was quite nice, but the nighttime air reminded me that this was, in fact, a mountain. The covering of clouds no doubt played a hand in the considerable drop in temperature. *Why did I come outside in this cold again?* I thought, as I aimlessly trudged along.

By chance, I turned my head. In that direction lay the Third Research Ward. The Third Research Ward. That is to say, the residence of the great Ms. Miyoshi Kokoromi. Perhaps that vivisection freak was already fast asleep. I wonder. Even though they all had accommodations, each and every building was windowless, so there was no way for me to tell if the lights were still on.

"…………"

The ER Program was abundant with qualified researchers willing to teach, and as such, lectures were offered in languages from all across the globe, but as you may have expected, the only lecturer in charge of teaching in Japanese was Ms. Kokoromi. That meant, as a Japanese person, and as someone from the Kansai region, I naturally wound up as some kind of interpreter, which lead to plenty of opportunities for us to interact with one another.

Of course, there were plenty of people in the same position as me, Japanese exchange students (as well as some foreigners who could understand the Western Japanese dialect), but most of them dropped out mid-term. Chasing all the young talent away one by one earned Ms. Kokoromi a nickname. *The Early Reaper*. Incidentally, the nickname given to me, the only one of Ms. Kokoromi's students who didn't drop out, was *The Hara-kiri Masochist*.

"…Hang on."

Thinking about it now, I can't shake the feeling that I'd somehow wound up with the worse nickname.

"…still, I can't believe it. Why'd we have to bump into each other in a place like this…?"

This trip was supposed to be Kunagisa and Utsurigi Gaisuke's reunion, but somehow it had turned into a reunion tour for me as well.

I recalled Suzunashi's words. The ones she spoke to me right after my reunion with Ms. Kokoromi. She saw right through me. I had no desire to tell

Kunagisa what I'd done when I was abroad. And it was likely for the same reason I didn't want to know what kind of *Team* Kunagisa and the others had built together.

"It feels like I've become a horrible person lately… was I always like this?"

Perhaps this was just my mask starting to slip.

At that moment, I heard an animalistic growl coming from somewhere. If it had been as large as one of the wards, it would have been one thing, but in this darkness that made it hard to make out my own features, it was impossible to tell where it was coming from. Being as cautious as I could, I surveyed my surroundings. I couldn't see it anywhere. Just when I was starting to think I imagined it, once again, a deep growl came from the darkness.

"I can hear you, so why not show yourself…… No matter, there's no hiding that stench, is there……?"

It probably wasn't the time to be making uncharacteristic wisecracks, but my concentration faltered for only a moment. But before that moment had passed, **it— no, they** pounced.

One from behind and the other from directly in front of me.

"——!"

It goes without saying, I was knocked over. I collapsed onto my right side, bashing my arm harshly against the bricks. I managed to cushion the fall somewhat, but it didn't look like I'd be getting up anytime soon. No, even if that wasn't the case, **they** wouldn't have let me. **They** pinned me down with extraordinary strength and then— **licked** my face.

"……………………"

It finally dawned on me.

"…dogs?"

They were dogs. Two massive, black dogs, each the size of a middle school boy. **Grrrr**, they growled as they continued to **lap** at my face. Their saliva coated my cheeks, and to be frank, it was deeply unpleasant, but since I was being held down firmly by *their* front legs— all four of them— I couldn't move a muscle. I couldn't even struggle for struggling's sake; I had no choice but to let them do as they liked.

I see, I couldn't spot them because their jet-black fur melded into the darkness, and the reason I couldn't tell where the growls were coming from was because there were two of them… As I continued getting trampled, I gave it some sober thought.

"——op."

A voice.

This time it was human. I couldn't hear well enough to pick out what was being said, but I managed to raise just my head and crane it in the direction of the voice. It was pitch black, so I couldn't make out who the figure was, but still, I could tell that someone was standing there.

"Stop."

A woman. Her voice was disparagingly cold, but her enunciation was frighteningly clear. The instant she spoke, the dogs backed off me. Then they swiftly trotted over to her side. Liberated at last, I pushed myself up with my arm, shook my head, then taking my sleeve, I wiped all the saliva off my face. Looking down at my chest, I could clearly see what looked like four cartoon paw-prints left behind. It struck me as more ridiculous than pathetic.

"It seems I've caused you quite some trouble boy." When she spoke to me, her voice was just as cold as before. "I didn't think anyone would be walking about this late at night so I didn't bother to leash them. Please accept my humblest apologies."

Her manner of speaking was completely monotone. There wasn't a

single comma. Still, how should I put it? She had the crisp, clear voice of a thespian; I had no trouble making out what she was saying.

"………." I slowly stood up and took a single step towards her. "… No, I don't really mind."

"You're a strange boy to not mind a face full of saliva."

She smiled faintly. This time, she was the one who approached me, and taking a handkerchief from her white coat, she wiped my face. I felt oddly sheepish (I can wipe my own face, damnit), but I let her do as she pleased.

As I did, I looked her over. A lab coat. In other words, she was one of the researchers here. It wasn't like a middle school uniform or anything, and I didn't think it was a rule that researchers had to be wearing them at all times, but it seemed that all the staff at Shadou Kyouichirou's research facility had made it a habit.

In other words, this person was-

"…there. Nice and manly." Her strange choice of words reminded me of something an old lady might say. Then she stashed the handkerchief back in her pocket. "I am Kasugai Kasuga— but you probably already knew that. —I suppose you are the famous Kunagisa Tomo?"

"No, I'm the *pointless kid*."

"Ah then you're the homecomer tag-along. Now that you mention it your hair isn't blue. And you're a boy. You are a boy right? Apologies. It's so dark I can't see very well."

She nodded, and stuck out her right hand. It seemed she was going for a handshake. I hesitated for just a moment, but in the end, I grasped it.

The two massive dogs hung around Kasugai's ankles as if attending on her. Taking another look from a distance like this, they had rather charming faces. I wondered what breed they were. They looked like Dobermans, but I felt like they might be a tad too large. They were about a

size or two bigger than a Saint Bernard or Pyrenees. Large dogs have a tendency to look dopey, but these two had an air of elegance about them.

“It’s not wise to be walking around at this hour,” Kasugai said disinterestedly as she let go of my hand. “This research facility is home to all manner of classified information after all. You would find it troublesome if people started to wrongfully suspect you of something would you not? Or do you have business with someone?”

“Ahh, well…” In contrast to Kasugai, my words came out as more of a jumble. “That’s actually what I’m trying to remember.”

“Trying to remember?”

“My memory is awful, I forget why I left the lodge in the first place.”

“You’re more of a comedian than you look. As expected of Miyoshi’s pupil.”

Kasugai’s lips curved into a smile, and she chuckled. It wasn’t really a joke, but there was nothing to gain by insisting *no, really. My brain’s capacity is almost zero, in fact it might as well be. I’m human garbage. I even forget my own name sometimes. Just forgetting would be bad enough, but sometimes I remember it wrong. A memory like mine isn’t even zero, it’s negative. My stupidity is so novel and refreshing that in elementary school I wrote the name of the girl next to me on my test and wound up scoring her a zero.* I felt like it was better to be considered a comedian than an unimaginable idiot, so I simply said, “perhaps.”

“Are you really walking your dogs this late at night?”

“I like the night. The triplets do too. Better than daytime at least.”

“Triplets?” I looked at the dogs gathered around her ankles once more. One, Two. Anyone who could count could clearly see that there were only two of them. “These guys are triplets?”

“Yes. Do you hate triplets?”

"No, I love them. It's just- isn't one of them missing?"

"One of them's sick and undergoing treatment— or to tell the truth you could say it's being experimented on." Kasugai said without so much as a shrug. She didn't appear to be kidding. "These pups are waiting their turn. I need them to be healthy so I'm exercising them. "

Kasugai Kasuga.

Zoological physiology, animal psychology, and molecular biology. Science is science, but she was unlike Professor Kyouichirou or Utsurigi, who, like Koutari and Neo, focused on mechanics and physics and dealt with theories and equations. Right, if anything, her area of expertise was far closer to Ms. Kokoromi's human dissection. That is to say, the two of them were researchers who specialized in *living beings.* To her, animals were neither pets nor objects of affection, they were merely test subjects.

I glanced at the two dogs again. Maybe the impression I got was clouded by my own bias, but the dogs gathered round her feet were not just elegant; to me, they looked almost pitiful.

"By the way what in heavens are you all doing this deep in the mountains?" Her voice still lacked any and all intonation. "It's not like you came all this way just to see a familiar face and you didn't come to check on the professor either."

"Who knows?" I raised both my hands, feigning ignorance. "I'm just a tagalong. You'd have to ask Kunagisa."

"If you came to break Utsurigi out of here then I think you're in over your head."

"……………"

I froze, both hands still in the air.

"The professor's obsession with Utsurigi isn't what you'd call normal. Who knows what that old man is thinking? Just what is he going to

have me do?”

She said, turning her back on me. It was as if she was looking at something in the distance. Far beyond the limits of her gaze lay the Seventh Ward, the very ward where Utsurigi Gaisuke resided.

“…Kasugai, are you saying you don’t know what the professor’s researching?”

I asked, thinking back to what Kunagisa said earlier.

“Research? Is that what it is?” My choice of words elicited a thin smile from Kasugai. “Can you really call what the professor’s working on research? Maybe it’s not. You might be better off saying Professor Kyouichirou is waging war. Not that I could tell you what kind of war that might be.”

“…Huh?”

I had no clue what she was talking about.

“Rather,” Kasugai set her gaze on me once more.

“The one whose actions I don’t understand is myself. Even as I wonder what I’m doing here I’m made to solve unreasonable and absurd problems day in and day out like some kind of work horse.”

“You are?”

“I am.” Solemnly, Kasugai gave a deep nod. “I am indeed. What on earth is that old man so fixated on?”

“………”

Somehow the conversation had taken a worrying turn. Come to think of it, Shito had shown a considerable amount of bile towards Neo, but when it came to how Kasugai spoke about Professor Kyouichirou, the manner of her contempt was somehow different. It wasn’t merely complaint or idle grumbling either. So what was it?

"Dogs."

Kasugai changed the topic abruptly.

"Do you like dogs?"

"…not really. Not that I hate them either. I mean, they're animals, aren't they?"

"That's right. It's said that animals tend to gravitate towards animal lovers but that's probably just superstition after all. Seeing as animals take a liking to me that is."

"Who knows? I've never studied animal psychology."

"Hmm. My field is relatively niche even among academics after all." Kasugai shot me a suggestive smile for some reason. Its meaning was lost on me. "That's why I'm locked away in the mountains like this."

"Locked away…?"

"Oops slip of the tongue. How careless of me. It seems you have a talent for putting people off their guard. At any rate please forget I said anything boy."

Then her expression returned to normal.

"That's right. Since you have the time why not join me in some playful banter?"

Right as she said that, she issued some kind of command to the dogs. The dogs responded immediately, with one circling behind Kasugai, and the other circling behind me. Once there, they *laid down*.

"No need to stand around. Take a seat boy."

She said as she planted herself on the back of the black dog. Admittedly, its massive body was the perfect size to function as a sofa, but if any animal activists found out, we weren't liable to get off with just a

warning.

"………………"

Glancing behind me, the black dog was staring at me pitifully. Stare all you want, what do you expect me to do about it?

"What's the matter? Don't be shy have a seat. It's basically a wild animal so it's nice and soft. There's no need to worry. That pup's got a strong body. It's not like you particularly like dogs anyhow."

"No, it's a thoughtful gesture, but unfortunately I have a disease that kills me in two seconds if I sit on a dog's back."

"Hmph. Suit yourself." Kasugai twirled her finger. Seeing that, the dog behind me promptly got up and made its way to her side. Kasugai rested her elbow on its back as if it were the normal thing to do.

"Everyone seems to find this distasteful. To me it's the same as using a down futon. I guess it's a problem if it's living but they're fine with it once it's dead."

"No, I'm just afraid of getting bitten."

"No need to worry. These two haven't been experimented on yet so they're quite well behaved. The other one's being experimented on right now though so I can't make any promises. You know— to tell the truth Miyoshi has mentioned you many times."

"Yeah? That's a frightening thought." That freak better not have spread any more half-truths about me. Forgive me, but unlike Suzunashi, I'm not in the position to take Ms. Kokoromi's big mouth lightly. "What kind of things did my esteemed professor say?"

"Nothing but worthless little stories. But I can't help thinking that the you from her stories and the you standing before me don't match up. You came all the way here to rescue Utsurigi— rescue is the right word is it not? —But you're not diligent enough to go out of your way for others are you

kid?"

"What a cruel thing to say with a straight face… I'll have you know I'm quite diligent. I keep a poem diary each day." I shrugged. "Still, you're right that I'm not one to *go out of my way*. I never once considered rescuing Utsurigi. That would be Kunagisa. Suzunashi's taking the laissez-faire approach, but as far as I'm concerned, I just don't care."

"Hmm."

"Besides, I played a part in a rescue operation like this just last month. It's one thing if it's to save a cute girl, but I have no intention of putting myself in danger for the sake of some middle aged man. I intend to be nothing more than a bystander this time around."

"Bystander huh? What a wonderful word."

Kasugai smiled. In stark contrast with Ms. Kokoromi, Kasugai's smile carried the alluring charm of a grown woman. "A truly wonderful word. Probably one of the best. And a good word never fades."

Kasugai spoke in a sing-song voice. Her words stuck with me, but I felt like she had gotten them from some famous foreign film.

"Now then boy. Neo Koutari and Miyoshi all seem convinced that you are Kunagisa Tomo's lover but that's not really the case is it?"

"Finally, someone else who thinks so." I shrugged. "When it comes to everyone else here, as soon as they open their mouths, it's all *lover this, lover that*— Frankly, it's insufferable. And it's not just the people here either, that's how most people see it."

"Who can blame them? When a boy and a girl of your age get along too well people can't help but look at it through that lens."

"Of my age, huh…? The problem is, mentally, Kunagisa's far too immature, and I'm far too old."

“Old? Miyoshi said *that guy’s maturity is stuck in eighth grade*.”

Eighth grade—thirteen years old.

The age I was when I met Kunagisa.

Six years ago.

“………..”

“Regardless *lovers* huh? What an awful word. Probably one of the worst. And a harsh word never fades.”

This time the words were arranged such that you couldn’t even recognise where they came from.

“It’s like a burden you’re forced to carry. Not that I’m saying all burdens are bad. What do you think? Do you believe in love?”

“I wonder. I’ve never loved anyone, not even once.”

“How trite. Still the gifted aren’t well-suited to romance in all sorts of ways. It’s like an evolutionary dead-end. That’s what makes Professor Kyouichirou so amazing.”

“—What is that supposed to mean?”

“At its core talent does not create. If anything it only leads to destruction. As someone who’s been a part of the ER System you should understand— of the geniuses who have left their mark on history the majority of them exhibited their talent in their teens or their twenties and that was it.”

“Huh— I mean, I guess.”

There are plenty of great people who have left behind pictures or records of themselves in their old age, but the era in which they could genuinely be labelled *geniuses* had ended in their thirties. After that, they had simply lived on using their experience— the leftover dregs of their *genius*. Not to say that there aren’t a scant few examples of *geniuses* who stayed that

way their entire lives. It's just that, in those cases, they had simply died young.

That was likely the reason Kunagisa Tomo and Shadou Kyouichirou were so incompatible. It brought to mind the conversation Suzunashi and I'd had on Primary Ward's second floor— the *generational divide*. A former *genius* and a present-day *genius*— the two of them must have found the rift insurmountable.

The professor, faced with the talent he had once lost.

And Kunagisa, in possession of a talent that she'd one day lose.

They were geniuses one in the same, but who knew a simple generational gap could give rise to such disparity?

And what of him— the man at the centre of all this?

What did that make Utsurigi Gaisuke?

Was he a *genius*?

Or a *former genius*?

"And yet even in his advanced age the professor continues to create. Even if that creation is born from ruin it's still a remarkable achievement."

"But that's—"

Having been reminded of what Kunagisa said earlier, I came dangerously close to letting it slip, but I managed to stifle it at the last second. Seeing this, another faint smile came to Kasugai's lips. "Hmm. It seems we're both a little loose-lipped tonight," she said, tilting her head. Her mannerisms were as refined as ever.

"That doesn't sound like an especially fun conversation so let's get back on topic. I'm glad we agree that you and that Kunagisa girl aren't lovers," Kasugai continued without pause. "But it almost appears like the two of you aren't even friends. Would I be wrong to make that assumption?"

“That’s one hell of an opinion… but that would depend on your definition of the word friend.”

“I suppose it would. How foolish of me to ask without qualifying.” Kasugai gave a slight nod. “That said it’s not like life gives you many options to begin with. Your choices boil down to six at best. Like hate disinterest—and what of the last three?”

“Pleasant, unpleasant, and indifferent, I suppose.”

“Oh my. You’re quite good with words. But In the end that’s still just a roll of the dice. That’s why the belief in soulmates is no more than an illusion. Not that I’d go so far as to say that everything is left up to chance or happenstance however.”

“My thoughts are largely the same.”

“My my don’t we have a lot in common? I’m a little surprised. Although perhaps this is merely coincidence as well?”

“Who knows… even if it is, it’s not half bad as far as coincidences go.”

“Not half bad? If you’re not just saying that I might just be a little happy to hear it.” Kasugai laughed lightly. “Six choices huh? That’s something I made up on the fly but it has a strange kind of charm to it.”

“…but I don’t have six choices. Thinking about it now, I don't feel like I’ve ever made a choice since the day I was born.”

“That might be another thing we have in common.”

Kasugai’s answer was almost instant. I looked at her, but her expression told me nothing.

“Yes. Even if we suppose that there are only six choices the inexplicable seventh choice still exists. Because no matter what you’re faced with you always have the choice *not to choose*.”

“To choose not to choose…? Talk about a *psychological contradiction*.”

“Yes. I hate choosing and deciding. And after talking with you and Miyoshi I had a thought. Perhaps you are the same.”

“There’s certainly part of me that feels that way,” I conceded. “Quite frankly, it’s easiest that way.”

Kasugai nodded in approval.

Not to choose.

Not to decide.

Misachi, Professor Kyouichirou’s private secretary, had said to me—*it’s against my principles to have an opinion.* That line suited me perfectly, and it was likely the same for Kasugai.

“It is isn’t it? I think so too— oh dear.” Kasugai cut herself short and rose from the dog’s back, “—it’s raining.”

Hearing that, I looked to the heavens. The rain clouds had finally started to spill over. A smattering of raindrops, what could best be described as a light drizzle, began to fall from the sky above. In turn, Kasugai ran her hand along the dogs’ backs once each.

“I can’t have these pups catching a cold so I’m heading back to my research ward before it starts pouring. I still have mountains of backbreaking work to do you see.”

“Sounds rough.”

“Work ought to be rough. Whether you want to do it or not. Don’t you agree?”

She said, taking a single step towards me. I thought she might go in for another handshake, but I was wrong. She took two more steps, closing the distance between us. Then she held my head in both hands and stared at me.

“…? Kasugai? Wha-”

-t’s the matter? But before I got a chance to finish, a shockingly long tongue poked its way out of her small mouth, and using that tongue, she **licked** my cheek. The tepid sensation of undeniably living flesh was transmitted directly into my brain.

“…!”

Without thinking, I utilized a series of admittedly violent measures to shake Kasugai off and make my escape, retreating by almost three meters.

“What. Was. That. All of a sudden?”

“…You said you didn’t mind when a dog did it so I wondered if it was the same for humans.”

“I absolutely, positively do mind.”

“Is that so? My bad then. Apologies.” She was completely calm. “It’s been a long time since I’ve met any boys so I got carried away.”

That’s not getting *carried away*.

“Boy. Since I have you here let me be candid with you.”

“Yes…?”

“How would you like to march those legs of yours into my research ward and into my bedroom for some fun with an older woman?”

“…please don’t be candid about such an insane question.”

“Insane?”

“Yes.”

“Is that a no?”

“It is.”

"Even though I'll let you do whatever you want to me?"

"………………"

No, I'm not actually wavering, am I?

I see, the reason why her enunciation was bizarrely clear despite her lack of intonation was because of that long tongue of hers. Fearing what that meant for me, I said, "there are other men around, aren't there?"

"Like Koutari, or Neo."

"I don't count men who don't groom themselves or watch their weight."

Princess Kasugai swiftly and callously brushed them aside.

"How about Shito? That boy is like fresh fruit, ripe for the picking."

I offered him up.

"Hmm. Uze's already got her mitts on him."

He was already spoken for.

"Then what about Utsurigi? He's a fairly good-looking man, isn't he?"

"Is that so?" Kasugai tilted her head. Her interest, seemingly piqued. "Utsurigi never leaves his ward so we've never actually met. Although I have seen a considerable amount of his research in the mail and while I was certainly moved by the craftsmanship of his work I'm not perverse enough to get hot and bothered over data."

She had been toeing the line of perversion the moment she tried to lay hands on a minor she had just met, no, she had already crossed it. Not that I said anything about it.

"Well why don't you think it over. Either way you should leave soon

as well. It'd be awful if your health failed this deep in the mountains. My specialty is animals and the only humans Miyoshi works on are the dead. Bye-bye."

Kasugai bowed her head and wandered off in the direction of the Fourth Ward. Like witches' familiars, the two black dogs followed behind. For some reason, they struck me as less like a couple dogs on a walk and more like a pair of bodyguards. I rubbed the side of my face that she licked and watched as Kasugai slowly faded into the darkness.

"You should leave soon…huh?"

Did she mean I should head back to the lodge, or back home? In the moment, I couldn't tell. The me who had yet to glimpse even one tenth of the vast and unthinkable truth that hung over Shadou Kyouichirou's research facility couldn't tell.

Gradually, my clothes grew damp. I should return to the lodge for now. I turned on my heel and headed back through the cedar forest.

"Still, I never thought I'd run into Kasugai," I monologued as I walked through the woods. They were already thick with an eerie atmosphere. After all, it would soon be witching hour. "Is that just another coincidence…?"

Whatever the reason may have been, *Dead Blue'*s former compatriot, *Malignant Green,* was held captive by Professor Shadou Kyouichirou, a man funded by none other than the Kunagisa House itself. What's more, I, Kunagisa Tomo's friend and travelling companion, just so happened to run into my teacher, Ms. Miyoshi Kokoromi, who had been stationed at this research facility. Come to think of it, when we arrived it was already evening, and now, having met Kasugai, I'd come face to face with everyone in the facility a mere six hours later.

Honestly, why do I gravitate towards misfortune?

"…Ahh, I remember now."

I came to a stop amidst the patter of the still-falling rain.

"That's right… I haven't met **everyone at the facility**…"

One more.

There's a **chance** that there's one more. I didn't know how great a chance that was, but as long as that chance existed, I couldn't rest. If there was even the smallest of possibilities, it didn't matter how mathematically insignificant it was.

Why had I left the lodge in the middle of the night in the first place? It certainly wasn't because I couldn't sleep. Then was it to meet Kasugai? Nonsense. I wasn't some psychic who could predict such a chance encounter.

That's right.

I left the lodge in order to **confirm something**. I had gone outside in order to confirm or deny the existence of this final troublemaker.

"—Now then," I blinked slowly. "Is it time for No Longer Human to make his second appearance…?"

It was **something** I had felt on our way to Seventh Ward to visit Utsurigi. And I felt it even now. It dug into my back. A disgusting, inexplicable feeling seeped through me, as if I was being watched from far away, as if I was being spied on from far away, as if I was being observed from far away, as if I was being stalked from far away. No, you couldn't even call this a feeling, it was a murky atmosphere so thick that it settled over everything.

It was. A gaze.

"**Come on out**… **Mr. Intruder**. Or should I say Zerozaki Itoshiki?" I muttered to myself. "It's not very manly to scamper around and hide."

"I've never been partial to **scampering** or **hiding**."

Right behind me.

In the truest sense of the words, **she** was right behind me. She stood no more than a few millimeters, no, microns away from me. Forget hearing her breathing, she was so close that I might have been able to make out her heartbeat.

“……——”

How— how’d she get this close?

She’d snuck up on me to the point where she most certainly held my life in her hands, and yet I hadn’t noticed even a trace of her existence. I had been planning on taking her off guard by suddenly calling, *come out, come out wherever you are*, but in a cruel twist of fate, I was the one shaken to my core. I couldn’t so much as turn around, let alone make my escape. On the contrary, the shock made my whole body freeze stiff. I had to wait until she’d walked around to my front before I even laid eyes on her.

Denim pants and a pair of lace up boots that looked exceptionally striking on a woman. Above the waist, she wore a comfortable looking shirt, and on top of that, a long coat-tailed denim jacket that matched her pants. Her hair was long, which she wore as a pair of braids on either side. Her round glasses might have been more of a fashion statement than a genuine article, and finally, she wore a denim hunting cap. The cap was pulled down sharply, so I couldn’t quite meet her gaze.

My body shook. No, I couldn’t even manage that. I couldn’t shiver. I couldn’t tremble. I couldn’t feel any fear, or trepidation, or confusion, or even terror. I was terribly calm. A terrible calm was visited upon me. This sensation. I knew it well. This sensation was akin to standing face to face with Mankind’s Strongest.

The rain fell harder and harder. It had become hard to make out was directly in front of me. It seemed the downpour had finally begun in earnest. But something like that didn’t mean a thing. In light of the current situation, it couldn’t have mattered less. Faced with this sensation, even if the rain continued to fall forever, it would have been inconsequential.

“*Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou’s research facility—” In a jarringly light tone, she began. “—appears to be a graveyard to which the dead flock.”

“………”

“Is there anything as unsightly as an old man’s dreams? Does anything invite such pity as the elderly envious of youth? Almost like a ghost clinging to the world of the living— it’s just too unsightly, too pitiable, too sad, too wretched, too twisted, too heartbreaking, too meaningless, and all too pathetic. I can’t stand to watch.”

“…………”

I couldn’t respond. I was completely overwhelmed.

Seeing this, she smiled. “And yet, what lovely rain we’re having,” she said, pulling her hat further down her face, and almost as if she were some forest spirit— she let out an unearthly laugh.

“The splendid kind of rain that might yet herald what’s soon to come. Ha-ha, how consummate.”

“—you-”

“Allow me to make your acquaintance, my true name is Ishimaru Kouta— I look forward to working with you.”

DAY TWO (1) – BEGINNING BELATEDLY

SUZUNASHI NEON Chaperone

0

People are not always as they appear.

How they appear is simply how they are selected.

1

The rain must have stopped while I was sleeping.

It was six in the morning.

The sky remained cloudy; it was unlikely that the sun would make an appearance. Even then, it was already bright enough that I could make out the scenery around me with the naked eye. I was alone on the roof of the lodge, offering myself up to the wind. While that line may have had a cool ring to it, in reality, I was just absentmindedly waiting for my drowsiness to depart.

A number of puddles had formed on the tile roof. For the fun of it, I tried stepping in one. As you might have guessed, it sent water splashing in all directions. My shoes and the hem of my pants were wet. I stared down at them for a while, then, growing bored, I picked my foot up out of the puddle.

"—die."

I muttered, and suddenly, with my left hand, I drew the knife from its concealed holster in my jacket. It was paper-thin, almost transparent, the kind of knife a surgeon might use for a delicate procedure. Just swinging it lightly like this evoked illusions of slicing the air itself.

I tried swinging it two or three more times. It was a move that I had learned by watching Miiko, a sort of two-pronged slash. It's not like I had anything in particular I wanted to cut, but just by swinging a blade like this, an invigorating feeling began welling up within my heart.

“—that’s Aikawa for you,” I muttered, coming to a stop. “This is one hell of a blade.”

I doubt even No Longer Human has a blade like this. The length of the blade was unimpressive, so delivering a lethal blow might prove difficult, but its weightlessness and ease of use were worthy of praise. It was like a modern take on the ornamental dagger. Thinking about it, this was the first time I’d swung it since Aikawa had gifted it to me, but if it ever came down to it, it was sure to come in handy. I nodded to myself, and went to return the knife to its holster.

As I did, it occurred to me that there was no particular reason I had to use the knife in my left hand. I favoured neither my right hand nor my left, but if I had to say, then I guess my left arm was a bit stronger. However, given how light it was to swing around, the clear selling point of the knife was its speed, which meant I didn’t have to use my left hand. If anything, wouldn’t it be better to keep it in my right hand as a last resort. After all, most people were right-handed, so the fact that the holster was fashioned over the right breast in a way that was accessible to the left hand served as proof that the knife was intended for that very purpose, didn’t it?

Not just knives— but holding any kind of weapon tends to draw people’s attention. That obviously went for the people being attacked, but the same goes for those doing the attacking. Conversely, you could take it to mean that so long as you were sparing with that weapon, you were surprisingly safe from their gaze.

In the end, it all comes down to a diversity of approach.

It was an exceptional knife, but that’s all the more reason not to rely on it. With that in mind, I flipped the holster and slid it into my left breast pocket. Then, after storing the knife away, I threw the coat back on.

“—I guess it doesn’t matter, but it eases my mind…”

At the very least, it made me less tense.

I won’t deny that the soliloquy came accompanied by an air of self-deprecation. The bizarre nature of the research facility was more than enough to dampen my mood on its own, but add to that Ms. Miyoshi Kokoromi, not to mention Ishimaru Kouta…

Ishimaru Kouta…

To be honest, when I’d received the knife from Aikawa, I thought I’d never have a chance to use it, and on the off-chance I did, it would prove useless in my hands. Still, the peace of mind it offered was likely better than nothing. And now that the situation had turned out far worse than Kunagisa Tomo had predicted, clinging to that peace of mind might be all that I had left.

“—That’s quite the dangerous hobby you have there, Inoji. Slice is only two letters away from vice, you know.”

Suddenly, a voice came from behind. I whipped around in surprise. I’d already guessed who it was based on her voice and manner of speech, but there stood Suzunashi. She didn’t seem to have gotten dressed yet, as she was still wearing the Mandarin gown. Maybe it’s because she just woke up, but she wasn’t wearing her contact lenses, instead donning a pair of black-rimmed glasses.

“Good morning, Suzunashi. I didn’t know you were awake.”

“The sun and I have always been on good terms. I get up fairly early. Good morning, Inoji.” Suzunashi wore the traces of a sarcastic smile. “Knife drills first thing in the morning? Are you looking to join the foreign legion or something? If so, I could introduce you to some folks.”

“I’ll pass.” I put some distance between us by making my way to the roof’s edge. “I just wanted to get the blood pumping a little. It’s important to stay active in the mornings. You see, I’m almost twenty, right? I’ve got to get in shape before the weight of my teen years comes crashing down on me.”

“In that case, I’ll help. If you ever need a workout partner, count me in.” Suzunashi didn’t seem to be kidding. “And Blue? Where is she?”

"…We're not part of a set or anything. Even if everyone else seems to think so. Kunagisa's pretty much a shut-in. She also lives all the way in Shirosaki. We don't actually see each other all that often."

"True. If we're talking about people you see all the time, then that would have to be Asano, right? Being neighbours and all."

Suzunashi began stretching as she spoke. Judging from that, I suppose she hadn't come to the roof expecting to see me, but came to do some light callisthenics instead.

After a round of stretches, Suzunashi placed a cigarette between her lips. "Say, Inoji,"

"When I was in elementary school, I read quite a fascinating book. I've read plenty of books in my lifetime, but that was the only book I ever found interesting."

"Huh? What was it about?"

"Let's see. It was a mystery novel, but the interesting part was that, despite being about five hundred pages, the last half was completely blank. Talk about a twist."

"That's clearly a misprint."

"But it was interesting. I never saw it coming." Suzunashi took out her zippo and sparked it up. It was an extraordinarily cool gesture, but the Mandarin gown dampened its effect. "…It's not just books, movies are the same way. If you know a movie's runtime is two hours long, you always have a grasp on where you are in the story. If you're an hour in, then you're at the half-way mark, but if you're in the last five minutes, then you're at the climax. There's a certain safety that comes with that. They're not gonna cut the movie short unless the unthinkable happens."

"So what's your point…? That life is different?"

"Close, but not quite."

Suzunashi held out a cigarette. “Smoke?” I shook my head.

“What I’m getting at is this… say you’re watching a Hollywood movie but after the first hour the heroine hasn’t made her appearance, there’s been no hijackings, no robberies, not even an alien invasion. Do you think something like that would ever happen?”

“Not a chance.”

“Now then, picture a mystery novel where half way through no one’s been killed yet, and the detective hasn’t even shown up. Do you think a book like that exists?”

“Not a chance.”

“*That’s* how life is different,” She repeated. “**Something’s going to happen any minute now**, or **things should be wrapping up soon**… there’s nothing to base those kinds of predictions on, or should I say calculations? Now, with all that said, let’s get to the point. Inoji, what are your intentions with Blue?”

“My intentions? That’s a bit out of left field.” I tilted my head, pretending not to understand what she was getting at. “I don’t really intend on doing anything.”

“You ought to be at university, but you came all the way to a place like this just because she asked you to. And don’t forget how you completely lost your cool about Mr. Utsurigi and Professor Kyouichirou. What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“That’s a pretty fundamental question, but I wouldn’t know any better than you do. I prefer not to think about what I’m doing at all. Or are you saying that you can logically explain everything you do?”

“I may not be able to explain everything logically, but at least what I do isn’t one big contradiction. Don’t go around mistaking logic and sense, Inoji. Heh, maybe that’s not the best way to put it… You see, Inoji, I don’t believe for one second that any man could stand face to face with the girl he

loves and not feel the desire to hold her."

"…………"

I couldn't bring myself to say anything.

"Of course, you're free to do as you like, but you won't live forever. It'd do you some good to rely on others a little more. If not, you'll miss out on all sorts of things."

"…You make it sound like I'm some cagey bastard."

"Right. That's exactly what you are. After all, you've never once been able to trust someone, have you? But the thing is, Inoji, I like you. Asano can't help finding you cute either. That's why she practically begged me to chaperone you two. And the fact that Blue loves you goes without saying. You at least know that much, right?"

"That might work on Shito or Utsurigi, but… I'm not a child who gets caught up in likes and dislikes."

I knew full well that this wasn't something I should fight her on. She was only speaking the truth after all. And yet, I couldn't help myself. No, you couldn't even call this a fight, it was just— a child's sulking.

"Where's the proof that people wouldn't betray the ones they love? It's not exactly difficult to get along with people you hate, you know. Honestly, why don't you just cut it out already? Constantly going on about likes and dislikes is just going to wind up making everyone miserable."

"We're not talking about food here, I think it's fine to have preferences."

"Human relationships and a taste in food the same thing. Anyone with any sense, would like them all the same."

"You don't mean that." Suzunashi didn't fall for my provocation. Her tone was gentle yet firm as if handling a troublesome child. "Just a thought,

but have you ever meant a single thing you've said in your entire life? Or was it all- what do you call it again- nonsense?"

"…………"

"You know what I think? I think you could get away with saying something selfish every once in a while."

"…I don't talk much in the first place. I'm the quiet type after all."

"Oh really, is that so? I see how it is. This is your last line of defence. Or maybe the last shred of your pride? If so, then it's awfully cheap. You might think you're slick, trying to deceive everyone, but from the outside looking in, you look pretty stupid, you know."

"Drop it. Let's call it here," I said, avoiding eye contact. "I'm not in the mood to listen to any more of your lectures. I've had more than enough. Enough that if I lean over, I'd start to spill. I've already got plenty to think about."

"Plenty, huh…? You mean, yourself and Blue? Or perhaps Blue and yourself?"

"Is there something wrong with that?

"I never said that. I was just thinking it, that's all. Listen, don't you think you could look at the stuff around you for a change? As you are now, you're just like the researchers at this facility."

"How so?"

"The way you wall yourself up so no one can see what's going on inside. You know, Inoji? To be honest, we regular people aren't exceptional or unique like you and Blue, or even Professor Kyouichirou or Mr. Utsurigi; we find **what we don't understand** frightening. Because we don't understand it."

The unknown is terrifying.

The dread that Professor Kyouichirou held for Kunagisa— I wondered if it was the same.

"…Fear of the unknown is just basic instinct. It's not something to worry about."

"But you prefer **things you don't understand**, isn't that right? You love when things are unclear, half-assed, and uncertain, don't you?"

Drawn to the things you don't understand.

The reverence Utsurigi Gaisuke had shown for Kunagisa— I wondered if it was the same.

"…Not particularly."

"Get better at lying. You might be able to fool everyone else, but you can't fool me."

"Is that something a monk should be saying?"

"I'm a heretic. I don't practice my beliefs because I don't have to. Regardless, you like the unknown. That's why you wallow in your dubious circumstances… Still, even if it's only every once in a while, even if it's only a little, why not try and let the rest of us in?"

"I've been trying, even now," I said, "but I have my limits. It seems like everyone has endless expectations for me. And trust me, I'd love to live up to them, but if they demand something from me that I just don't have, what am I supposed to do? Being told *I let them down* only bothers me more."

"What the hell's with that half-assed affection?" Suzunashi said abruptly. "Society's not tolerant enough to accept a self-centred misanthrope who, despite it all, yearns to be by someone's side."

"—What?"

"If you really think everything's so miserable, then you should hide away in the mountains like me. It'd be easy for you, wouldn't it? You'd be

able to live a secluded life all by yourself. Pessimists should just go off somewhere where they can be as pessimistic as their twisted little hearts desire. I hope you don't think I'm cold for saying this, but people who can live alone, should. That's how the strong all live, you know."

"And that's why you rarely meet strong people? An interesting theory. It requires quite the leap in logic, but at least it's not a contradiction. How interesting," I nodded facetiously, "but I'm weak. I'm just a cowardly cynic."

"Inoji. Why don't you just cut it out already?"

Suzunashi mocked me.

"Cut what out?"

"Making it sound like you're the only one who's defective. What do you gain by pretending that you can't do anything? Do you love self-flagellation that much? I can't stomach you thinking that you're just a fool while Kunagisa's some kind of saviour. Listen, that's enough talking, so get your ass over here."

"What for?"

"I'm gonna punch you."

You'd have to be an idiot to hear that sort of thing and willingly get any closer. Seeing me rooted to the spot, Suzunashi calmly spread her arms wide and said, "alright, alright."

"I won't punch you, so come here."

Relieved to hear that, I made my way over.

She punched me.

"…that hurt."

"That's what we call percussive maintenance."

“My head hurts enough from all the thoughts swimming around it already… Please spare me.”

“Your head hurts?”

She grabbed a fistful of my hair.

“Don’t worry. It’s only a scratch.”

“…………”

“Take this.”

With that, Suzunashi let go of me and planted her fist square in my forehead yet again. It wasn’t an especially strong punch. I stumbled two or three steps back before coming to a halt.

“For what it’s worth, you don’t seem all that weak to me.”

“…Think whatever you want, Suzunashi.”

“Then allow me to say what I want as well. You’re capable of living alone. You’re certainly strong enough for that. Strong enough not to depend on others. …but on the other hand, when it comes to getting along with people, you could realistically do a much better job. You said *you’ve been trying,* but you actually know the truth, don’t you?”

“……………”

“It just looks to me like you’re failing on purpose.”

In April, surrounded by geniuses.

In May, strung along by my classmate.

In June, head-to-head with a high school girl.

Each time, I had failed.

But were those failures really unavoidable? In truth, had I known

everything and simply chose the wrong path on purpose?

Afraid of success, terrified of victory.

And now, July.

At *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou's research facility—

Did I intend to fail this time as well?

"…I'll go wake Kunagisa up."

I turned away from Suzunashi to make my escape, but she did nothing to stop me. She must have thought that I'd had enough. If so, she was right.

I was hollow enough already.

"Good grief…"

She really does love to lecture, doesn't she? Still, the more pressing issue was likely that I was the kind of masochist who didn't especially hate being lectured.

Once at Kunagisa's room, I knocked on the door. There was no response. She was probably still sleeping. She should have gone to bed quite early (for Kunagisa, that is), but the long journey must have really taken it out of her. Kunagisa wasn't the especially resilient type.

Careful not to make any noise, I opened the door and stepped inside. As expected, she was fast asleep on the bed. Kunagisa was a restless sleeper, so half of her duvet had fallen to the floor. She seemed carefree, wearing a completely defenceless expression as she murmured in her sleep. What a happy person, I thought.

A happy person.

A happy person.

But was she?

I made my way to her bedside and crouched down. I gently reached out and stroked her blue hair. There wasn't any meaning behind it, but I did it nonetheless. I played with her hair a bit, and then my fingers made their way down to Kunagisa's cheek.

"…Come to think of it, Utsurigi said something similar about me."

Still.

Still, Suzunashi.

Don't think you know everything. You're clueless as to what kind of *unspeakable secrets* I carry. You have no idea how twisted, how abysmally sinful a person I am. I don't want to be lectured to by someone who doesn't know, and it's not like I want you to know in the first place.

What I don't trust is not other people, but myself. Not that it makes a difference.

"God, how miserable… Is this guy alright…?"

I muttered as if I was talking about someone else entirely and placed a finger on Kunagisa's lips. Tracing their contours, I ran my finger across them once. Then, after a moment's thought, I moved my hand, this time, to her throat. I found her carotid artery. I felt the pulse of Kunagisa Tomo's life, and then-

I lightly slapped her on the cheek.

"Eh…wha?" Her eyes flickered open. "…huh, Iichan? Ugh… mornin'."

"Mornin'."

I slapped her cheek once more. "It's time to get up."

"Wha…already? I feel like I only slept five minutes." Kunagisa rubbed her eyes. "Weird. I haven't slept well at all lately."

"It's all that exhaustion catching up to you. You run that shabby body of yours ragged. Why not try going somewhere just for the sake of it, not just because you've got some sort of plan? Like a vacation. How about Mongolia? Anywhere's good, so long as it's not another sketchy place like this."

"That might be a good idea… It sounds exhausting though, so it's not gonna happen."

Scooting to the edge of the bed, "tie my hair up," she said. I nodded, and then, taking the black hair tie off my wrist, I began to gather Kunagisa's long hair together. I wasn't sure whether she gets it styled, but I felt like it had grown a considerable amount since our reunion.

"Tomo, do you not cut your hair?"

"Nope. If I cut it, then I couldn't get you to put it up for me anymore. That'd make me sad," Kunagisa pouted. "I guess the weather's getting pretty hot though, isn't it?"

"Don't you leave your AC running year round…?" That's when I remembered. "Speaking of, Professor Kyouichirou and Utsurigi both said something about you changing your hairstyle."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I did."

"Hmm…"

Professor Kyouichirou met Kunagisa seven years ago. Utsurigi last saw Kunagisa two years ago. However, when I reunited with her, I thought she looked the exact same as when I last saw her. In that case, what kind of journey had her hairstyle gone on?

"There, ponytail finished."

"Thankoo. Is it cute?"

"Super cute."

"Have you fallen for me all over again?"

"Head-over-heels."

"Do you love me?"

"With all my heart,"

I answered dutifully. "Well then, shall we have breakfast?"

"Let's start with something to eat, then we can get to brainstorming."

"Sounds good." Kunagisa stood. "Yup, first thing's first, we need to decide who we're gonna start with—"

"Who?" I repeated. "You mean between Utsurigi and Professor Kyouichirou?"

"Yup. Gotta solve things one at a time after all. Which do you think'll be easier, Iichan?"

That was a difficult question. Both answers felt equally likely, which meant both of them were also equally unlikely. I thought about it for a moment. "The simple answer would be Professor Kyouichirou," I replied.

"That Utsurigi guy might seem easygoing, but he's quite stubborn, or maybe I should say self-indulgent. Enough to give you a run for your money. Only doing whatever he likes, saying whatever comes to mind, it's like he's completely uninterested in anyone besides himself. I don't know why he's so adamant, but I still feel like there'd be more room for discussion with Professor Kyouichirou."

"Your view of Sacchan's spot on, leaving aside the part where you called me self-indulgent, that is. You've gotten a lot better at reading people, haven't you, Iichan? Still, that's only *if you had to pick*. Professor Kyouichirou's not about to give up easily either. I said it yesterday, didn't I? This is something he staked all his hopes on, it's the culmination of a renowned academic's life's work— whether what he's working on is actually that impressive or not, I don't think it's gonna be simple…"

“I wasn’t making a comparison or anything. We have a way. Even if it wouldn’t work on Utsurigi, we have something that would work on Professor Kyouichirou. Say, for example, we asked Nao for a favour.”

“Ahh… I see what you’re getting at.” After a short pause, Kunagisa nodded. “I see… you’re saying we cut off his funding at the source? And if we did that, the professor would have no choice but to set Sacchan free… is that right?”

“There’s no need to actually go that far. Merely hinting at it should be more than enough to intimidate him. That would be effective enough, right?”

After all, inviting three outsiders into a facility conducting top secret research would normally be unthinkable. The fact that the professor had allowed Kunagisa’s intrusion in the first place demonstrated how fearful he was of the Kunagisa House.

Of course, even if we did ask Kunagisa Nao to shut off the facility’s funding, realistically, it wouldn’t be possible. He was but one piece of a larger whole that was entirely unknowable to me; even as a direct descendent and secretary to the current CEO, there was nothing that Nao could do about it. Besides, Nao wasn’t the kind of sap who would bring his own personal feelings into the workplace. He was by no means heartless, but at the same time, he wasn’t particularly magnanimous either.

However, this kind of threat was only effective **so long as we never followed through on it**.

“Even if we don’t want to rely on Nao, we have plenty of other options. Take Chee-kun— who, now that I think of it, doesn’t get along with Utsurigi, so that probably wouldn’t work. Hiichan’s out too. Still, it’s not like Utsurigi cornered the market on *cracking*. You used to do that kind of stuff too; if you put your mind to it, you could pull it off, right? If so, we might be able to threaten him by saying *if you don’t* ***fire*** *Utsurigi, we’ll obliterate all research data at the facility*. Given the nature of his research, it’s probably still connected to some kind of network despite being in the mountains. As long as the firewall isn’t anything ridiculous— no, no matter how strong it is,

to a former *Team* member, it may as well be paper. I'm sure the professor is well aware of that."

"Hmm. I see… still, that's pretty underhanded."

"And that doesn't sit well with you?"

"Nope, that's not it. I was just surprised to hear that sort of thing coming from you, Iichan."

"I'm an underhanded person. That's who I am." I nodded lightly. "You've known that for a long time, haven't you?"

"That's not it either. I'm saying it's rare for you to show your underhanded side in front of me."

"Huh… Is that right?"

"Did something happen last night?"

Kunagisa's gaze was less discerning, and more vacant as she spoke. Kunagisa could be awfully perceptive at the strangest times, which was made all the worse by the lack of logic it seemed to follow. I shook my head and said, "not really."

"It's just that I still have university and my part-time job to get back to, so I want to get this over with quickly. That's all. Nothing more than that."

"Hmm. Sounds like a lie," Kunagisa shot me a suspicious glance. "Iichan lies as easily as he breathes after all. Friends you can't trust when you want to are a pain in the butt, y'know."

"Honest. I'm telling the truth."

"Whatever, it's fine. So long as it's Iichan, I'll even believe your lies."

"…Well then, we should keep those plans in mind just in case… or I guess *as a last resort*. Before we feel the need to rely on the Kunagisa House

or any former *Team* members, we should try confronting the professor head-on. As far as strategy goes, I don't like our chances though."

The biggest hurdle would be whether we'd be capable of out bluffing and out deceiving Professor Kyouichirou. Given how Kunagisa was, she'd be useless when it came to bargaining or negotiations. She was, by any definition, a shining example of worthlessness. As such, the role of the Nonsense User would once again fall to me; however, the cards at my disposal were far too few. It looked like I'd have to use the hand I was dealt to bluff my way through an opponent with a full-house. Even the most generous estimates had my chances of success sitting flush at thirty five percent. If I was a major league player, it'd be quite the batting average. Thinking about it like that, it didn't seem too bad, but in reality, no gambler worth their salt would ever bet on those odds.

"No kidding. Let's ask Neon-chan what she thinks."

"Alright."

I placed a hand on Kunagisa's head, then we stepped out into the hallway. From there, we went straight to Suzunashi's room, knocked, and then opened the door. What I saw next shocked me.

Inside the room, stood three people.

Naturally, one of them was Suzunashi. She had already changed out of the Mandarin gown and back into her usual black suit. She must have been wearing her contact lenses, because she had taken her glasses off as well. She wore a serious expression as she leaned against the wall.

Of the other two, one had a face that I recognized. That said, it was not a face I ever expected to see here— Neo was sitting on the bed. However, his condescending aura was absent. Instead, he wore the same troubled expression as Suzunashi.

"…?"

The remaining person was someone I didn't recognise. Forget bald…

he was a full on skin-head. He wore a pair of black sunglasses that looked straight out of a Chinese gangster movie. His features were well proportioned, but given his hairstyle (if you could even call it that) and his complete lack of expression, his appearance was more than enough to cause some apprehension. He was relatively tall; he was like a stage actor from some kind of period drama. However, seeing his white lab coat, it was clear that he was a researcher at this facility, but…

"…huh…?"

Didn't I already meet everyone at the facility last night? If so, then who was this bald man? Who on earth was he? There's no way Chee-kun's information could have been wrong, could it? And yet, this man sat next to Neo as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Good morning,"

Neo called out when he saw me frozen in the doorway.

"Did you get a good night's sleep?"

"…Yeah…but I can't say it was especially comfortable." I nodded, still confused. "—it's nothing you need to worry about though.

"That's good to hear. It seems we caught you at the perfect time—" Neo chuckled, but the air it carried was far from his usual levity, rather, it was undeniably grim. "We were just about to come get you. Isn't that right, Koutari?"

"Don't ask me."

The mysterious hunk gave a curt answer.

Wait, what was that? Did Neo just—

"Koutari?"

Without thinking, I pointed at him. The mysterious hunk looked at me with disdain. "What of it?" he asked.

“What? Is there something wrong?”

“……”

I took a step back. When I did, I bumped into Kunagisa standing behind me. Kunagisa, who was unable to see what was going on in the room, let out a strange yelp like a small animal.

Koutari, if I remember correctly, was covered head to toe in hair like some kind of youkai from a picture book, or at least he should have been. I was so taken aback by the state of affairs that I couldn’t contain my surprise.

“…Wait. Huh? Hang on just a second. Uhhh…… sorry, I seem to be confused.”

“You’re the one who told me to cut it,”

Koutari said in his low voice. He was as unfriendly as always. Now I was certain. This man, despite looking nothing like him, was Koutari. He cut off all of his bushy long hair—no, he shaved it off, and that included his goatee. Did he really do all this just because I told him to?

“I wouldn’t have done it otherwise. Take some responsibility for your words.”

“……”

Oh man…

This was not what I had in mind…

Still off balance, I said, “this suits you much better. It’s quite sharp.” Of course, even had that not been the case, I couldn’t have said anything as inhumane as *nah, you looked better before. You shouldn’t have cut it.* Koutari didn’t react to my praise; he just looked away in silence.

When I looked to Suzunashi, she wore an expression that said *look what you’ve done*. I had nothing to say in my defence.

“Ha-ha. I’ve got to say, it’s quite the surprise, isn't it?” Neo clasped his hands together and spoke. “I mean, who would’ve thought Koutari had such a handsome mug? They say that women become entirely new people after a haircut, but maybe it’s the same for us men too. I was blown away when I saw him this morning. Completely flabbergasted. Who knows, if I shaved my head, maybe I’d be a stud too.”

“Not happening.”

They’re rapport was the same as always. “…Honestly, if it weren’t for the circumstances, I might have been able to laugh about it,” Neo continued ominously.

“…If it weren’t for the circumstances?” I repeated. “What do you mean? Did something happen?”

“You’ve some strong intuition, exchange student,” Neo said. “I was just discussing that with this stunning young lady.”

I turned to Suzunashi once more. “That’s right.” she nodded.

“Inoji, I… I don’t know how to say this, but it seems like something awful happened.”

“Something awful?”

What might that be? It would have to be *awful* enough to get Neo and Koutari to come all the way to the lodge this early in the morning. For that to be the case it would have had to be something to do with Professor Kyouichirou or Utsurigi…No, could it have been about last night? Did someone spot us? As I thought about it, I brought my hand to my cheek.

“…………”

No, I’m not talking about how Kasugai **licked** me.

“Exactly.” Suzunashi nodded. “Do you remember shortly after you moved in? Back in February? Something happened that led to you and Asano

becoming friends, right? It’s something like that. …No, it’s **even worse**.”

“…**even worse**?”

I couldn’t even imagine what that might be.

I turned back to Neo.

Neo heaved a sigh and picked himself off the bed.

“It’s easier if you see it for yourself… come with us to the Seventh Ward.” Neo strolled past me, scratching at his head. “Today was the first time I’d ever stepped foot inside that place… but this is a first for me as well. I wonder if it’s some kind of karma.”

“The Seventh Ward…? Then what about Utsurigi, did somethi–”

–ng happen? But before I could finish, “You see,” some of his prior demeanor must have returned, as Neo spoke in an exaggerated fashion,

“We’ve come bearing some extremely distressing news.”

2

It was like staring upon the face of god.

I had seen this sight countless times.

This sight that numbed your senses and paralyzed your thoughts, I had seen it countless times. I had seen it last month, the month before, and the month before that. Even still, it made me shudder. This sight, as oddly gripping as it was, as oddly enticing as it was, lay all throughout the room.

—no, I ought to say it was scattered.

This was clearly intended to be seen.

It was intended to be a spectacle.

"—Utsurigi, Gaisuke…"

Utsurigi Gaisuke's body was crucified to the white wall.

Almost like a martyr- no, I couldn't make such a comparison in good conscience. They were nothing alike; no matter what angle you viewed it from, the sight before me was nothing so lukewarm. In the end, what lay before me was a mutilated corpse. A mutilated corpse and nothing more. Was there any kind of metaphor that could encapsulate something like this, something as definitive as this?

"……"

Those eyes, those grinning eyes that concealed their predatory gaze were long gone. Pierced through the hollow pits where they once resided, was a pair of stainless steel scissors. The half-open blades had each found their place in his right and left eye sockets. The scissors were swallowed almost all

the way to the handles, so forget damaging the ocular muscles, the blades had almost certainly reached the brain.

That itself was more than enough to ensure he was no longer alive, but that wasn't the end of it.

First, his mouth.

His jaw hung slack, the kind of slack that suggested not a single breath of life remained within him. Pierced through his mouth was a knife that could only be described as brutish. So brutish, in fact, that it made the knife currently fastened to my chest seem like nothing more than a toy. Just like the scissors had been, the knife was buried deeply; it pierced through the back of his throat and into the wall behind him. This was the lynchpin in Utsurigi's crucifixion.

Next, the chest.

As if he had undergone heart surgery, his muscle and bone had been carved open. **Through the opening** his insides lay exposed. Peering within, I was overcome by the instinctive desire to look away. I was forced to acknowledge that humans were nothing more than an amalgamation of meat and blood, nothing more than raw components crammed inside a sack of skin.

The stomach.

The wound from his heart continued all the way down to his navel. And so, as if liberated from their cramped flesh sack, viscera and bowel spilled forth. Tugged out into a pulpy mess. The blackened tubes of flesh hung free, as if crying for attention. The dreadful stench carried all the way over to where I was standing. After witnessing a scene like this, even a child who hated their vegetables wouldn't be able to eat meat for a long time. And they'd certainly never eat liver again. Disgust eclipsed fear.

Both legs.

They were **splintered** to the point where one couldn't discern their original shape. Shards of bone were poking out here and there, which made it

hard to look directly at them. But the mutilation didn't stop there. Much in the same manner as his mouth, broad knives bore their way through each of his thighs. Straight through the centre. In other words, they didn't just pierce the flesh, they also crushed bone. A lynchpin in the mouth, and two more through the legs. Utsurigi's body appeared suspended in mid-air.

Crucified.

A bloodied Utsurigi Gaisuke.

The white hair, the orange sunglasses clattered at his feet, and his blood-stained lab coat where **all we had** to identify him; it was hard to say his body still held any resemblance to its original form.

But the strangest thing of all was **this**.

The body **had no arms**. As if they had been torn off, everything past the shoulder was missing. It made him appear more imbalanced, more unnatural; the sight of his limp sleeves hanging by his side made it feel all the more uncanny.

It was surreal. Utterly surreal.

Rather than cruel, rather than inhumane, the act that resulted in this pitiful sight struck me as incomprehensible. Even a dismembered corpse would have made more sense. What kind of meaning was there in devastating a single body to this extent?

Crucified.

The floor inside the room was dyed a deep red. I suppose there's no need to clarify that it was Utsurigi's blood. A portion of it had already started to dry, and as it oxidised, the colour gradually grew darker. The hideous display suggested that every drop of blood had drained from his body.

Still, rather than the floor, the eye was naturally drawn to Utsurigi's half-destroyed corpse and— and the wall behind him. The white wall behind him. What was on the once-white wall behind him.

Written in blood.

Giant letters. As if the final ornament on Utsurigi's corpse, as if the finishing touch on this macabre tableau, a sentence was scrawled in blood.

Naturally, it wasn't the final words of a corpse. It was clearly penned by the one responsible for this grizzly scene— that's right, this was a message from the culprit.

The letters had run in places, so it was considerably difficult to read, but I could just barely make out the message's contents. They were handwritten in English.

《You just watch, 『DEAD BLUE』!!》

"………………"

『Shut up and watch, *Kunagisa Tomo*.』

I-

I looked at Kunagisa. She stood beside me.

Yet again, I froze.

Kunagisa Tomo-

Staring at the scene splayed out before her.

At her former comrade, at the dear friend she came to rescue, a man she had reunited with only the day before, crucified before her eyes. Eyes gouged out, throat pierced, chest agape, stomach torn open, legs stabbed, arms discarded, and crucified, the visage of Utsurigi '*Malignant Green'* Gaisuke was reflected in her eyes. And, reading the message left for her by the one responsible,

She was smiling.

Kunagisa Tomo was faintly smiling.

Happily. As if things had worked themselves in her favour. As if she had finally gotten what she had wanted. Without a scrap of innocence or trace of joy, she wore an indescribable smile.

As if enraptured by the grim spectacle.

As if comforted by the horrific display.

As if intoxicated by the gruesome scene.

Without a doubt, this was a Kunagisa Tomo I did not know.

A *Dead Blue* I did not know.

Whatever this thing was, it was unknown to me.

When she was talking with Professor Kyouichirou.

When she was reunited with Utsurigi.

This was an entirely different beast.

The words Utsurigi spoke to me yesterday prior to a blade being run through the back of his throat, the words of a man who knew a different era of Kunagisa Tomo, I had finally begun to understand what they truly meant, even if only a little.

Understanding in full would likely take a little more time. Nonetheless, at that moment, a switch had certainly been flipped. After six whole years, the switch that marked the belated beginning of Kunagisa Tomo and myself had finally been flipped. After all, the end of the beginning didn't herald the beginning of the end, it simply meant that the beginning had come to its conclusion. Whether the end was soon to follow would only be apparent once it was all over. And so-

The Verge and *The Bacteria* were still, as if gazing into each other's eyes.

to be continued.